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DID SHE SIN? OR, A MAN'S DESPERATE GAME.

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL,

AUTHOR OF "TWO GIRLS' LIVES," "SISTER AGAINST SISTER," "THE EBON MASK," "A DAUGHTER OF EVE," ETC., ETC.



"WITH A GASPING MOAN ON HER LIPS, SHE TOTTERED DOWN THE STEPS AND OUT INTO THE SNOW CUMBERED PATHS."

Did She Sin?

OR,

A Man's Desperate Game.

A Romance of a Young Wife's Fight with Fate.

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL,
AUTHOR OF "VIALS OF WRATH," "SOWING THE WIND," "TWO GIRLS' LIVES," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AND A GREAT SORROW.

It was at the close of a snowy December day. All day long, and all the night before, the thick, steady storm of snow-flakes had been coming down, until to-night it seemed as if all the world was lying lost under the high heaping softness.

Marchbrook Park looked like some enchanted place, with its hundreds of tree-branches swaying softly and silently with their burden of the white coldness. There had been scarcely no wind since the storm had commenced, so that every tiny twig, every leafless vine, bore its full capacity of the beautifying snow.

Here and there were dotted the evergreens, looming vividly dark from out the white arms that seemed caressing them; the fountain was piled with graceful precision in different rows from base to apex; the roofs of the summer-houses looked like peaks of crystal—there seemed no paths, no way out of the beautiful limitless wilderness that stretched away from the windows of Marchbrook, and melted into the tender dunness of the fast-coming night.

At one of the satin-draped windows of the drawing-room at Marchbrook a young girl stood, looking out into the quiet beauty of the storm; a young girl whose exquisite contour of figure and poise of head, and lissom grace of carriage was apparent at the slightest glance.

She had been standing there some time, the amber satin curtains lined with warm, dusky red velvet, sweeping each side of her. The twilight had deepened since she had been standing there; a footman had come silently in and lighted the gas; the roaring fire in the open grate had been brightened and replenished, and now was a bed of solid golden red comfort; a package of newspapers and letters had been laid on a center-table of inlaid mosaic, and the tall liveried man-servant had left the room and yet the girl did not stir from her place.

Outside the darkness deepened, and a long lance of light from between the curtains parted by her presence, streamed warmly out on the snow; the darkness deepened, until even her young eyes could see nothing beyond that bar of light, and at last she turned away from the window, into the brilliance and luxurious magnificence of the room.

She fulfilled the expectation her graceful shoulder and back and proudly-carried head had promised. She was exquisitely beautiful, of that rare type of perfect blonde loveliness that is not often seen.

Her face was delicate and high-bred, pure and lovely beyond expression, such a face, such a countenance as one would instinctively know accompanied fine intellectual qualities and a sweet, sensitive nature.

The complexion of this face was as dainty as a blossom—pure ivory with the merest warmth of a blush pink, that contrasted gloriously with her large velvety blue eyes, full of spiritedness and fearlessness and innocence, radiant as stars on a frosty night. Her mouth was small, with warm scarlet lips—a temptingly beautiful mouth, with the possibilities of deep passion in its tender curves, and with equal possibilities of pride and self-control.

Her lovely hair that had gleams of burnished gold all through it when the sunshine or the gas-light fell on it, that was of a richly pallid shade, and grew low on her fair white forehead, was arranged in a becoming and fashionable coiffure of puffs and flossy frizzes.

Her dress was a simple dinner toilet of black silk, trimmed with velvet and fringes, its darkness only relieved by the old yellow lace at her throat and wrists, and the delicate hue of a blue silken tie above the heavy gold necklace and cross she wore.

She was a beautiful, intelligent, cultured girl, accustomed to the *crème de la crème* of society; she had lived all her life in the midst of the most extravagant luxury; she was of a warm, ardent disposition, sunny and joyous, high principled, and the pet of her widowed father, Judge May, who had retired from active life

at the advanced age of seventy and was peacefully, happily, ending his days in his magnificent country-seat—Marchbrook.

This one daughter of his—fair Cecil May—was not the only child. Besides her there was a son, Oscar, as unlike Cecil in appearance and disposition as it was possible for two human beings to be. People said he was more like Mrs. May, while Cecil was one of those freaks of Nature who resembled nobody, was like nobody but her own sweet self.

Cecil came away from the window and under the searching light of the gas one could have seen there was a look of wistful anxiety among the shadows of her blue eyes, as if her young heart had some weight of trouble. She walked up to a cushioned spring lounging-chair that stood before the glowing coals and sat down, her elbow on its arm, her chin resting on her hand, her blue eyes looking in the hot-hearted fire.

"I wonder what papa will say when I tell him about—about—Mr. Valence?"

Her thoughts brought a slight increase of that clear blush-bloom to her cheeks, and a gravity to her eyes; then, as she remembered afresh the words Sydney Valence had spoken to her not three hours before—words he had braved the storm to ride to her and say, the flush deepened, and her look of gravity gave place to a smile of girlish delight.

Her brief recalling of her lover's words was ended by the entrance into the room of Judge May, and Cecil arose to meet him, going forward and linking her arm affectionately in his.

"Papa, I am so glad you feel well enough to come down for dinner to-night. You cannot imagine how lonely it is for just Oscar and I."

He smiled indulgently down in her sweet uplifted face.

"So my little girl misses me, does she? Well, Cecil, I am glad I am strong enough to be down to-night, if only for your sake. It will seem quite like old times for you and I to have a chat together before dinner. Sit down, dear, where I can see you; tell me all about everything. What have you been doing to-day?"

Judge May had taken his accustomed chair to the left of the open fire, and Cecil drew a low hassock near him and seated herself on it, and then it was, that, looking at her face, as both firelight and gaslight flooded it, the judge saw the traces of care and anxiety on the perfect features.

"I am especially glad to have you in your old place to-night, papa, for I have something very particular to tell you. Papa, you wanted to know what I had been doing to-day—Mr. Valence called this afternoon."

Her voice dropped to a low, exquisite key, and she turned her head partially away from the grave eyes upon her.

"Yes, my darling, Sydney Valence called, and he came for what?"

The pink flush deepened on her forehead as she went on, with drooping eyes and averted face:

"He told me he—loved—me, and wanted me—to marry him."

The grave, kindly eyes were resting still on the fair drooped head.

"And you told him what, Cecil?"

No immediate answer came to the kindly question, asked in that peculiar tone that indicated Judge May's anxiety as to the quality of her reply—and Cecil knew, before she answered, that Sydney Valence's suit would not be favored by her father, while at the same time she was equally certain he would not positively prohibit it.

"I told him, papa—I was not sure I—loved him; that I had not thought much about him—that—that—he had better speak to you."

Judge May stroked the soft, silky curls fondly, his keen frosty eyes looking intently into the fire as if there he could find a solution for the difficulties that seemed to annoy and perplex him, that made his forehead wrinkle into heavy, thoughtful frowns.

A silence so long that it made Cecil almost restlessly impatient, followed her shy, halting explanation, broken after several long minutes by Judge May:

"Well, daughter, you acted suitably and maidenly under the circumstances. Let Mr. Sydney Valence come to me. I will tell you, frankly, that I do not think he will come; but, if he does, I will receive him for your sake."

Cecil looked up, surprisedly.

"You think he will not come! Papa, why?"

There was a flush of mortification on her cheeks as she lifted her face.

"Because, dear, I hardly think Mr. Sydney Valence will relish what I feel it will be my duty to tell him—that I think he has an eye to

the fortune you will take him; that I think he is presumptuous in paying his addresses to you when he is such a comparative stranger. Don't think me hard-hearted, darling, when I talk so to you. Remember, if you find you love him, and his character and standing bear the investigation to which I shall certainly subject them, that I shall allow you to be governed by your own discretion."

Cecil's fair face grew shadowed and thoughtful.

"Papa, I never would marry any one of whom you did not approve. I am not sure I—care for Mr. Valence; I thought—perhaps—I did. But if you say no, papa, I know it will be for my own good."

"My darling! Now let me tell you something else. This morning, while you were busy with your duties, I had a call in my room—a long interview, and you were the topic of interest. Little girl, it isn't every young maiden who has two offers of marriage in one day—but you have had. Clyde Carriscourt was my caller, and your suitor."

Her forehead, cheeks, even her neck flushed warmly.

"Mr. Carriscourt, papa! I did not know Mr. Carriscourt cared for me, at all. He has never intimated such a thing. How strange that he whom I have always been accustomed to reverence and respect and love as a dear friend of yours and mine, should—want to—marry me."

Judge May smiled.

"Then you have always liked him, dear? He is older than you are, considerably—about twice as old—and you are seventeen. He is one whom I have known all his life, have watched him grow from boy to man, and know him thoroughly—his mental and moral worth, his increasing popularity as a lawyer of repute and keen, conscientious intelligence, his comfortable, yes, his large fortune. Clyde Carriscourt is a man to whom I would dearly love to see you give yourself—yet not unless you loved him. Cecil, you have your choice. Take time to decide, and I can promise you that if it is in my power to make you happy, you shall be so."

He smiled lovingly at her, but she saw how pale and weary he looked, and instantly her own face was all eager reproach of her own thoughtlessness in thus allowing the very first night of his convalescence to be so burdened as it had been.

"I have been cruel to let you become so excited and exhausted, papa! You are pale and faint—you were not able to be down, I am afraid. Lie down on the couch, papa, do!"

But he smiled her fears away.

"Nonsense, girlie! Droop your head nearer me, so I may lean against you. I am a little tired, but that is perfectly natural after the unusual exertion of getting down-stairs. There comes Oscar."

The entrance of his son of course put an end to all further affectionate little confidences between them.

He was a tall, severe-faced man, with intensely dark eyes that were piercing in their regard; with a clean-shaven face that displayed the firm, compressed lips—that Cecil often thought were almost cruel in their expression. His hair was jetty black, and cut closely to his head. He dressed elegantly, and always looked the gentleman.

Now he came in the room with a bow and a smile.

"I am very glad to see you down, sir. Cecil, it is four minutes past seven; will you see why dinner is delayed?"

She instantly obeyed. All her life Oscar had ruled her, not by affection, not by unkindness or severity, but by some power he possessed over her, and which, amiable and graciously sweet as she was, she never resisted.

That very moment the butler entered—grave, pompous.

"Miss Cecil, dinner is served."

She turned with a laugh to Oscar.

"We are ready! Come! Come, papa, you haven't taken me out for so long, and it's so good to have you with us again."

She stooped her lovely, laughing face so she might see his. Then, she straightened up with a look of horror and fear.

"Papa! What is the matter? Oscar!—Oscar! What is the matter with him?"

In an instant Mr. May was at his father's side—looking at the placid, kindly face that was pale and set—at the face that would never smile more, at the eyes that would never see them again.

For, in the pulsation of a heart-throb, in the twinkling of an eye, Judge May had died!

And bending frantically over him, calling him every tender, imploring name, this fair

girl was all unconscious of the terrible complications of Fate in store for her, that his death meant!

CHAPTER II.

A HEARTLESS MAN AND A GREAT WRONG.

FOR days Marchbrook had been wrapped in that terrible silence and gloom that follows a death and precedes a funeral. Without, the storm had fallen steadily, until it seemed as if the heavens above were superloaded with snow whose abundance would never cease. Within, shut out from the light of even the dun-gray skies, with Judge May lying dead in his room; with the servants going about with quiet tread and solemn faces; with people coming and going on business connected with the final ceremonies; with desolation and gloom, crushing sorrow and numbing woe reigning over her, Cecil somehow lived through those days, somehow got over the torture of the funeral ceremonies, and somehow found herself settled into the customary routine of daily life and duty.

The funeral was over; the dear, kindly face was gone forever; the chair he used would be forever vacant of his presence; but the house was rid of its tokens of woe, the shutters were opened, the servants' voices were less lugubrious, their tread less oppressively slow and solemn. The storm had ceased, and the glad sunshine poured in a flood from a cloudless blue sky over the expanse of dazzlingly white earth as if adding its share to the cheerfulness that Cecil realized was best for them all.

In the large, cheerful morning-room she had brought her work, and was sitting there, bravely trying to feel resigned to the terrible affliction that had befallen her. She was dressed in deep mourning, and her sweet face was pale and piteous. Her blue eyes bore unmistakable signs of tears, and her lips occasionally quivered in spite of her resolute efforts.

She had been there alone, sitting between the glowing grate-fire and the window, when Mr. May entered, and came across the room toward her with a deliberate purpose in his step and manner that reminded her at once his presence was not accidental.

She looked up, smiling faintly.

"I thought perhaps you would come here. You remember you told me yesterday you wanted to see me."

"Yes, I did say so. I expected to find you here."

He did not seat himself, but walked slowly up and down the long, pleasant room, where everything betokened unlimited indulgence in taste and wealth. His shrewd, keen eyes roamed over the elegant articles of furniture and decorations, from them into the conservatory beyond, where such rare flowers bloomed, where fountains played.

He looked out of the heavy plate glass windows, from which the silken draperies were drawn back, into the wide-reaching, snow-bound park, whose boundaries were beyond his vision, and a slow smile gathered on his compressed lips, and gleamed in his cold, calculating eyes.

"It is a glorious inheritance," he thought, jubilantly. "It is mine, too—all mine, by the death of my father. It was a pity that he should have died and left it all, but since he did die, it has come into rightful, appreciative, pain-taking hands. Marchbrook is a heritage of which royalty would have no need to be ashamed!"

He was not pleasant to look at as he walked slowly to and fro, occasionally sending a keen look at Cecil's drooped face and golden head. He was a man who one would instinctively know was not given to fine, generous impulses, a man whose heart was cold as ice, whose brain was keen and calculating, whose temper was well under control, whose nature was merciless, grasping—as complete an opposite to his genial, warm-hearted, whole-souled father as it was humanly possible to be.

Presently he sat down, and it cut Cecil to the heart to see him coolly draw up Judge May's favorite easy-chair to the fire, and occupy it.

"Yes, I certainly wanted to see you, Cecil. Of course you know that death in a family often necessitates changes, while in some instances, as this, for example, it imperatively demands great changes."

She listened, as her fair hands tremblingly essayed to set the stitches.

"I have not thought much about it, Oscar. I have been so—so heart-sick thinking—about—papa."

He interrupted her almost impatiently.

"If you are going to cry, I shall leave you at once. If you have any delicacy about you, reserve your feeling for times when no one will

see the display. I have come to discuss business matters with you—important matters that concern you intimately. In the first place, I have a statement to make, which will naturally startle and surprise you, which perhaps you may not believe, but which I can substantiate by ample proofs among my father's papers."

His mysterious words, his cold, hard manner sent vague thrills of dismay and bewilderment through her. Her hands dropped to her lap, lying like lilies on her mourning dress; her sad, wondering eyes looked up in his face.

"You puzzle me, already. What have you to tell me, Oscar?"

He looked at her a moment—perhaps his cruel heart misgiving him a second. But only for a second.

"Are you prepared to hear it? Do you think you can bear it?"

Her heart was beating fiercely by this time. Her face, even her lips, were pale.

"Yes! yes! Whatever it is, tell me, at once!"

"You are a brave girl, Cecil. I will tell you. You are not my sister, you are not Judge May's daughter, you are not my mother's child. When you were an infant you were adopted by my parents; who you are, or what your parentage is, we never knew. You were a nameless foundling, taken from poverty by my father's charity."

It almost frightened him to see how she heard him. She did not speak a word—of horror, or protest, or surprise. She did not move a muscle, but the most deathly expression of dumb bewilderment and agony and wild fear crossed her white face, and stared mutely from her blue eyes.

"I know it comes like a shock to you; I regret very much having been obliged to break this news to you. But it was an imperative duty, and one which justice to us both demanded to be performed. You understand?"

She had changed her position by this time, but there was most awful, unspeakable anguish and bewilderment in her face.

"Not papa's child! not papa's daughter!"

She almost gasped the words in a piteous whisper.

"No, Cecil, you are not. Consequently, you are in no way related to me. Do you yet comprehend all that it means? Do you understand now what I said when I told you that my father's death demands great changes?"

Then, it all occurred to her. Then the full force of the terrible truth came home to her. She was an alien in the home where she had been so loved and cherished, where she had been so happy, where care and trouble and sorrow had never blown their cold breath on her. She was suddenly come to the end of all that because she had been there only on sufferance, as it were, only because Judge May had loved her, and now, her one dear friend and benefactor dead, she was an intruder whose presence was undesirable.

She did not presume to try to reason it all out; how it was that she was not a daughter of the May's whose name she bore—such pitiful, shaking surprises cannot be reasoned out until the bitter sting of anguished revelation has worn away.

But, she realized it; she accepted it as a truth, recalling, with wonderful fidelity, little things that had happened in the course of years past, at which she then had vaguely, briefly wondered, but which now, in the searching light of this revealed truth, explained themselves, and added truthful force to this cruel testimony.

Not a May! The words rung in her ears, through her soul and brain. Not Judge May's child—not his natural offspring as she had always thought, but—oh, yes, yes, the child of his heart, the daughter of his love, to whom she owed all her happy, beautiful life.

She would never forget that, never! And a great gush of tears came springing to her sad blue eyes, tears that relieved the strain on her nerves, the tight crushing agony at her heart.

She looked through her tears at Mr. May.

"He loved me, though; he was always so good, so good to me! To me he was father, to me he always will be my dear beloved father!"

It would have touched any less steely heart than Oscar May's to have heard her tender tribute. Instead, he frowned.

"Of course you should be grateful. Now, further on the subject. You may, or may not, know that the judge left no will, so that everything goes to me. You are entirely unprovided for. Now, I come to the pith of the entire matter. What is it you propose to do?"

"To do?"

It was pitiful—that surprised reëcho of his words.

"Precisely. You are—let me see, seventeen years old, and consequently able to look at things in a sensible, practical light. Of course, your remaining here, in what will be my bachelor establishment, is out of the question. While my father lived, of course it was different, but now, remarks would be made—"

A hot flush surged over the marble pallor of her cheeks—the first tinge of color that had visited there since Judge May's death.

"Remarks! Oh, Oscar, how can you speak such a word to me! Remarks! When no one in all the world knows I am not your—your sister."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not so sure of that. Besides, we both know it, and so long as I am not your brother, I can see no satisfactory reason for assuming that relationship. As your friend, you may rest assured I will never see you want for anything."

"Then—then—Oscar, I am turned out of Marchbrook, because you don't want me here?" Her voice quivered piteously, and the pain in her blue eyes touched him—even him.

"It is nonsense to call things by such hard names. You will admit it is advisable for you to seek a home elsewhere, where, as I said, you shall want nothing. Now, Cecil, you have borne all this unpleasantness like the resolute woman I knew you to be, and I know you will look your future in the face with equal bravery. Consider me your friend to command—consider me your friend to advise, and just here, I want to speak of another matter. Are you engaged to marry Sydney Valence?"

There came a faint flush over her face.

"No. I am not."

"Because," he went on, with a little frown at her uncommunicativeness, "it seems to me that a marriage with him would be a very good way out of your difficulties. Mr. Valence is a fine, gentlemanly, handsome fellow, and although I do not know exactly the state of his money affairs, yet I would not hesitate to advise you to marry him—if he asks you."

His cool, calculating, heartless words sent a feeling of utter homesick longing over her. She realized keenly how less than a friend he was—this man whom all her life she had regarded as a brother, although never feeling fraternally attached to him. She realized her utter friendlessness, when she heard him deliberately advise her to marry to get out of the difficulties that presented themselves—to take the first chance that offered itself for securing a position for herself. Utterly, wholly desolate and friendless, all her sad, sad heart looked out of her beautiful, pitiful blue eyes.

"Papa—yes, I shall always call him papa!—had spoken to me about Mr. Valence, and I shall try to follow his advice."

She flushed a little, remembering her lover's ardent words, remembering how they had thrilled her own heart; remembering Judge May's injunction never to marry any one, under any circumstances, unless she loved him.

And she wondered, with another tremor, that was mingled with pain and bliss, if she did not love Sydney Valence.

Her momentary indulgence in her thoughts was cut short by Mr. May's addressing her.

"You will want money, Cecil; here is a check for two hundred dollars, which you will understand I am under no obligations to give you, but do so of my own free will."

She refused it, almost haughtily.

"Thank you; I do not wish it. Papa kept me plentifully supplied with money. I have all I need."

He half-smiled at her spiritedness, and replaced the check in his book, noways loth so to do.

"I more than half admire your motive. It means you are proud and independent—two good qualifications for one in your position. You will at least let me offer my good wishes for your future happiness."

She looked at him earnestly, drearily.

"It seems to me that I have forgotten what happiness is. Oscar, you have hurt me sorely to-day, but I will try to forgive you. I will immediately go away. My trunks can be packed and ready in an hour—will you have them sent to the station? I prefer to walk myself; I want to get away at once."

He nodded his head approvingly.

"Saunders will see to your luggage. This then is farewell, I presume. But remember, Cecil, I have voluntarily promised never to let you suffer for want of anything. Remember that."

She almost smiled.

"I shall never forget anything you have said. Oscar, good-by."

An hour later, a ghastly-faced, wild-eyed girl, dressed in deepest mourning, stood on the threshold of Marchbrook house; there was piteous, dumb yearning and an agony of half-fearful despair in her face as she looked around on the dear happy home from which she was ejected. There came a swift, sudden look of puzzled bewilderment when she saw Saunders take her trunks away, as if, even now, she did not comprehend it all. Then, with a sobbing, gasping moan on her lips, she tottered down the steps, and into the snow-cumbered paths—started on her hidden journey through life, unconscious of the future, or the fate that was lurking in wait for her girlish footsteps.

CHAPTER III.

LUCEFER AND AN ANGEL.

It was four o'clock of the same afternoon on which Cecil left Marchbrook—and on the wide pavements and carriage-way of Fifth avenue the snow lay in deep and almost undisturbed purity, for the unusual and extended severity of the storm had greatly interfered with travel through that aristocratic thoroughfare.

Although not later than four o'clock, it was getting dark; the street lamps were lighted, and the quiet and gloom of a stormy winter night was settling down on palatial mansion and snow-enshrouded avenue.

In one of the handsomest houses on the avenue—a high, broad double house of elegance of finish and artistic design—lights were gleaming warmly from many of the windows into the cold, white shadows outside. On the lower floor, every one of the six long French windows glowed like stars from the illumination within, while on the upper floors there was sufficient indication of the occupancy, or anticipated occupancy of the brilliantly lighted rooms, to give to the chance passer-by its own tale of gladness and good cheer.

Within, it was a scene of luxurious magnificence and almost extravagantly oriental splendor. Fires glowed in all the grates, sending goldenly warm red lances of light over Aubusson carpets; dozens of gas-jets burned inside their delicately tinted globes; luxuriant vines were trailed over pictures, around pillars, on the chandeliers; gorgeous flow-ers and rare tropical foliage had been rifled from the conservatories and were banked in the windows, on the malachite mantles, around the balustrade in the hall, over the doorways; rarely elegant laces floated in the deep, long windows, over sheeny-satin draperies; costly, unique furniture decorated the rooms, paintings adorned the lofty walls; servants in livery moved to and fro—everything was unrivaled for delicious, luxuriant elegance, and refined, almost sensuous comfort.

It was the residence of Griffith Pemberton, and here he lived in bachelor loneliness, amid all his magnificence and embarrassing wealth, with only his corps of servants for his household, and his friends for his companions.

He was a singularly fine-looking man, past fifty years of age, but grandly dignified and erect bearing, with very much the mien of a military man—tall, commanding, eagle-eyed.

He was fine-looking, with a clear, fair complexion that was its own witness of the simplicity and purity of his life; with keen, frosty blue eyes, laughing when he was pleased, gentle as a woman's when he was so willed, terrible in their lightning gleams when he was offended and looked straight at one from under his bushy white brows; with luxuriant, loose-curling hair, white as snow, through which he had a trick of threading his large, white fingers when he was disturbed or displeased, or impatient; with a heavy, drooping, frost-white mustache, no hair of which human eye had ever seen discolored or one iota removed from its snowy purity.

He stood before the grate in the dining-room that snowy winter afternoon, his hands behind him, his keen, pleasant eyes glancing around the elegant appointments of the room—a tall, handsome, finely-proportioned gentleman of culture and refinement, to whom fate and fortune had been very unusually kind—at least so all the world said.

At one side of the fire, seated in a leather reclining-chair, was a gentleman perhaps thirty-five years old, with a dark, haughty face, a palely-olive complexion that harmonized well with his dark curling hair and mustache and intensely dark eyes. A gentleman of extreme though refined elegance of dress, and grace of presence and courtesy of breeding, one of whom an instantaneous verdict would be given, nine cases out of ten, "a splendid young fellow, of

whom Mr. Pemberton need be, as he is, justly proud." But of whom, if one were a keen, close observer of human nature—if one were accustomed to the magic meaning of certain peculiarities of manner, and habit of expression, and trick of speech, would be unhesitatingly said, "A man utterly devoid of principle; a mean, vain, selfish soul; a soaring ambition and unbridled passions put into a fair body; a man who only lacks the opportunity to become a deep-dyed villain capable of wounding his dearest friend; and whose capacity for treachery is only exceeded by his wonderful duplicity in being able to conceal it." And the nine guessers out of ten would be wrong; for the truth is told of Cuthbert Pemberton when it is recorded that never a more deliberate villain lived than he; never a more successful one ever hoodwinked his victims.

And of all living people this grand, generous-hearted, whole-souled Griffith Pemberton, his distantly related cousin by marriage, loved, trusted and admired him.

They did not live together—Cuthbert had said he preferred his own way best, boarding at a hotel—but he often passed days at the Fifth avenue mansion, where he was always welcomed. He knew, for Mr. Pemberton had told him, that he was to be the main heir to the Pemberton riches; he accepted from Mr. Pemberton an allowance that was princely, and lived on it in his own way. He kept horses and a yacht, and was "hail fellow! well met," with young bloods of his own style; he was regarded as an eligible *parti* by Murray Hill young ladies, and altogether his star of destiny seemed brightly in the ascendant.

"It is so good to be at home again, Cuthbert, and so thoughtful of you to arrange such a welcome for me! Homesick as I'll confess I was all the six months of my tour abroad, I think it was worth it to get back again—to all this!"

Mr. Pemberton looked around with pleased glances that finally settled kindly on his relative's handsome, aristocratic face—the face that always wore a mask for him.

"Well—yes—it does look rather nice. I gave Frost *carte blanche*, and he's rather up in such things. So far as I am personally concerned I am glad to see you again—for all I am totally in the dark as to whether the result of your mission abroad will affect me pleasantly or the reverse."

He had a pleasant, well-modulated voice, with a slight languid drawl in it; and no one now would have detected the keenly intense interest and almost unendurable suspense hidden behind the low, well-bred tones.

Mr. Pemberton's face lighted instantly.

"My mission, yes! I thought of deferring my report until we were comfortable over our Widow Cliquot. But I will tell you now, Cuthbert. I was as nearly successful as I could have hoped to be in my search for the young girl. I have discovered she is living, and beyond doubt the child I am looking for. I have left Nelson in Florence to arrange for her coming to me—and then, my boy, I will be the happiest man in the world—happy for the first time since poor Genevieve died, and left her daughter to my care."

He was not watching Cuthbert very closely, or he could hardly have failed to see the shadow that crept in the young man's dark eyes. But he went on, almost in direct answer to the unspoken question Cuthbert would have asked.

"Of course my finding Genevieve's child will make no difference to you or your prospects, my dear boy. I have enough for us all. The girl will come to us to brighten up the quiet old house, and, Cuthbert, I have thought, time and again since I heard she was seventeen years old, and remarkably pretty, what a grand good thing it would be if you should marry her."

Cuthbert shrugged his shoulders.

"The bait is a tempting one, Mr. Pemberton, I'll admit, but I'm obliged to reserve my opinion until I have seen the young lady. She may not suit me, or I her. Like other young men, I have my standard of girlish beauty and excellence, and if this fortunate young lady should fall short of what my ideal is, certainly any fortune she might bring could not compensate. Or, if she possessed every virtue, and I did not love her, I would not marry her."

He uttered his admirable sentiments with a quiet conviction that would have been extremely difficult to have realized were totally at variance with his true principles. But, it was by the display of just such mock views that Cuthbert Pemberton helped keep up his enviable reputation.

Mr. Pemberton's fine face glowed with appreciative satisfaction.

"You make me proud of you, my dear boy; the woman whom you win for your wife will be honored and blest. Cuthbert, you are right. Although I cannot imagine my sister Genevieve's child as wanting in any of the requisites of girlish sweetness and purity of character, and nobility of soul, still, when I take into consideration the fact that she may have been neglected or misdirected since her mother's early death, it may be true that she will not be quite all I could wish. However, with the Pemberton blood in her veins she cannot be altogether amiss. She ought to be very pretty, too—her mother was the most exquisitely lovely girl I ever saw—fair as a lily, with glorious black eyes and hair like a raven's wing."

Cuthbert listened courteously.

"Perhaps the young lady resembles her father?"

Mr. Pemberton's face darkened wrathfully.

"Ah, her father! If I could only forget him—my poor, poor Genevieve! Never mention him to me, Cuthbert; curses on his beauty that—"

His voice choked, and he left the sentence unsaid, while a little demoniac smile was creeping under Cuthbert's mustache—that mask that served him so well, that so completely covered his cruel, pitiless, sensuous mouth, which, alone of all his features, would have betrayed his true nature.

A silence followed, broken almost abruptly by Mr. Pemberton.

"By the way, Cuthbert, I have been going to ask you several times since I came home, if you have heard anything of that rascal of a brother of yours lately? The last I heard, he had been up to altering some bank-bills, and was particularly wanted."

Cuthbert laughed.

"Oh, Syd! No, I haven't heard from him in a dog's age, nor have I any desire to hear. If he keeps out of my way, it is all I ask; if he should bother me often I don't know what I wouldn't be tempted to do. The remarkable likeness between us would make it extremely awkward for me."

Mr. Pemberton stood gazing thoughtfully at the glowing coals.

"As you say, the resemblance, physically, between you and your brother Sydney is remarkable. I think I never was able to distinguish you when you were children. The very trick of voice, carriage of body, were identical. But, Cuthbert, I thank God the resemblance is only outwardly. When I think of you, brother to a forger, gambler, and rascal, I sometimes wonder if Nature has not exceeded herself in the comparison she has made. You are all I can ask, my dear, noble, considerate boy!"

Cuthbert took the hand extended so warmly—took it with a close, affectionate grasp.

"You overrate me, Mr. Pemberton. Yet, in my heart, I know you have no truer friend, no warmer defender, no more honest well-wisher than I—who am a dependent on your bounty."

He looked so genuinely true and good as he spoke. Inwardly, he thought, "Blind old idiot, to be so helplessly twisted around my finger!"

Just then the butler came in the room, followed by his assistant, and in a very few minutes dinner was served.

Then, over the wine and walnuts, the two discussed the coming of the young girl whom neither had ever seen, the young girl whose future would be a rosy dream.

"But you have not told me her name, Mr. Pemberton. What name did your sister give this fortunate little heiress?"

Cuthbert was scientifically peeling a walnut as he spoke.

Mr. Pemberton's forehead gathered into a dark frown for a moment, and his frosty blue eyes shot out lightning gleams from under the heavy, bushy white brows.

"Her father's name she shall never bear; it has never passed my lips, it never shall be spoken in this house. He is worse than dead to me—he and his memory are accursed for my dead Genevieve's sake. Her name shall be the name her mother bore, the name I bear—your name. She will be Miss Pemberton, Griffith Pemberton's niece and heiress."

Cuthbert wiped his mustache daintily with his snowy napkin, his diamond ring gleaming on his white, slender hand—the hand that could be, that had been so strongly cruel, so pitiless—that would be merciless yet again.

"But her Christian name, Mr. Pemberton—what is that?"

"A name I do not particularly care for—but for her mother's sake, whose girlish, romantic fancy was pleased with it, we will like it—Elma."

Cuthbert repeated it.
 "Elma! I like it. 'Elma Pemberton!' It sounds well. I wonder how it will all end!"
 Ah—if he had known!

CHAPTER IV. A WOEFUL STEP.

CECIL MAY walked along toward the little secluded depot belonging exclusively to Marchbrook as well as she could for the snow that had been partially removed along the way. Her pride and indignation had revolted too thoroughly to allow herself to be comfortably conveyed in any carriage belonging to Marchbrook, and had it been possible for her to have taken her trunks away herself she would have done it.

She had not dared trust herself to say good-by to any of the servants whom she had been mistress over so long—with the exception of Kitty, her own maid—a bright, sensible, intelligent girl of Cecil's own age, and in whom Cecil had a warm, kindly interest, based on the excellence and honesty and integrity of the girl's character; and who, in turn, fairly worshiped her young mistress with a fervor of devotion and a discreet observance of the wide difference in their positions that attested to her good judgment.

To Kitty Cecil had briefly told her story, and her intention of at once leaving Marchbrook, and had felt that she had at least one true friend left when she heard Kitty's indignant protests and sorrowing sympathy and eager entreaties to be allowed to go wherever her mistress went. But Cecil had told her how impossible it was that she should go, and the girl had tearfully submitted to the wiser judgment; and the petted darling for whom every path had heretofore been so carefully smoothed, went out into the new, untried future, verily a lamb among ravening wolves.

She had gone perhaps half the distance between Marchbrook and Marchbrook station, when she saw a horseman coming along the road she was taking, swiftly as the condition of the snow would allow—Sydney Valence, whom she had not seen since that never-to-be-forgotten day when he had offered her his love and begged hers in return—that dreadful day when death had come and her Fate had commenced its work.

A quick, conscious flush stained her face as she recognized him; a look of perfect astonishment was on his dark, handsome features as he stopped beside her.

"Cecil! What are you doing here? On foot, in the snow—in your traveling dress! What is the matter?"

He dismounted, and took her hand with undisguised eagerness and delight.

She looked gravely at him, with an unconscious, sweet, shy tenderness in her pure eyes.

"I am going away, Mr. Valence. Since papa—since Judge May's death, I have learned for the first time I am not his daughter, and that, consequently, Marchbrook is not my rightful home."

Her voice quivered a little, but it was brave and grand in its fearless truthfulness.

The young man looked at her in blank amazement for a moment; then, he suddenly grasped her hand again.

"It seems incredible—and yet, strange as it is, I believe it. I always thought you different from the rest of your people—better, nobler, purer—every way superior; far too high and good for me, Cecil! But I am almost glad it has happened so—I can prove to you it is yourself I want, and not your money. My darling! I have been waiting so impatiently to hear from you, and now I was on my way to see you. Have you an answer for me now? Did you speak to your—to Judge May?"

A little flush crept to the edge of her hat again.

"Yes, Mr. Valence; I told him what you said, and—he—he—"

"I understand," he broke in, bitterly. "He naturally enough said his consent was impossible—that I had nothing to recommend me—that you were as far above me as a star above the gutter—that his hopes of your future were for a grandly brilliant marriage—that I was nobody or nothing, and that we must part! And, Cecil, if he said all that, he only did his duty by you, and spoke the truth!"

His face was flushed; hers pale as the snow around her.

"Oh, Mr. Valence! You must not speak so harshly of yourself! And, besides—papa—he did not judge you so cruelly. He told me he feared it was ambition, and not love that was your motive."

Young Valence's eyes looked eagerly into hers.

"But you know it is not ambition! You know I love you, my darling; I want you as much this hour, when you are homeless, penniless, as when I thought you Judge May's daughter and heiress! Cecil, my love, will you take me? You must—you must, for I cannot give you up!"

He was so eager, so earnest, so thoroughly the impassioned lover. His hands were clinging to her own, his dark, handsome face drooped near her, his pleading eyes searching her very soul.

He loved her—he certainly, certainly loved, else why his renewal of his offer made when all was sunshiny prosperity? And—try though she did, with all her girlish strength, to remember Judge May's counsel—try though she did to harden her heart against love, against this lover—to act according to the dictates of stern duty—to think that Judge May would have chosen Clyde Carriscourt for her husband even while he had left her unfettered to make her choice—try as she did, Sydney Valence won the day.

"You will not go out into the cold, wicked world alone, my darling! I will not let you! Look at me, Cecil, and tell me you will be my wife—at once! Don't refuse me! You are lonely, friendless, homeless—give me the right to care for and protect you! Cecil! Dearest! Say yes!"

The girl's heart was beating tumultuously. It was passing sweet to be so wooed, to have such blessed promises made her, to hear such a passionate voice pleading with her. But—was it right that she should yield? Despite her position, which Mr. Valence truly described, ought she to consent to this sudden marriage?

He stood in suspense beside her, hearing his own heart throb with quick, mighty strokes while he watched the conflict going on in the girl's heart, the momentarily changing result of which was distinctly mirrored on her pure pale face.

And the final result?

It could have ended but one way.

With the girl's eager, passionate nature; her natural craving for love, protection; her utter, utter friendlessness; her conscientious belief in her love for this bold, handsome young fellow, it could not have resulted differently.

She lifted her glorious blue eyes, and looked into his pleading face—and he read a shy, sweet consent that thrilled his very soul.

"Oh, my darling!"

Then, in the lonely gloom of the early twilight, he took her to his heart, and kissed her rapturously.

"I cannot say more to you now, dearest. You have been out in the snow and cold too long already. Listen, while I tell you what is best for us to do. You could not ride Danger—no woman could ride him, so that you will have to walk to the Marchbrook chapel—it is much nearer than the depot, you know. I will meet you there in ten minutes; we will be married there or in the rector's parlor, and we will take the next train for New York."

Ordinary as were the directions, no music ever sounded sweeter to the girl's ears; and as he kissed her again, then sprung on his horse's back, and she went on, it seemed to her the world had changed in all its aspects.

It was not a long walk to Marchbrook chapel, not fifteen minutes' walk even in that weather, and Cecil found her lover in impatient waiting when she reached it, her face flushed with shy, sweet happiness, her blue eyes wearing a mingled expression of grave thoughtfulness and restfulness.

"Everything is ready and waiting, my darling," he said, as he met her eagerly. "Danger and I fairly flew over the snow-drifts through which these poor little feet had to plod; I have seen the rector—an old, not altogether pleasant gentleman, dear, but he will answer our purpose as well as any other. Come, Cecil—come, love!"

There was sudden, eager entreaty in his voice again, for there had come into the girl's face a swift, terrified look, as if she had suddenly realized the awful solemnity of the position in which she was about to place herself. Her blue eyes looked piteously in Mr. Valence's face, as if searching for advice or relief.

"Come, Cecil, darling! See, the parlor is lighted, and the maid is holding the door open for us. Everything is in readiness; only a little courage, dear, and then a life of happiness. Come, Cecil."

He took her trembling chilled hands in his own, and led her into the house, into the warm, comfortable parlor, where wine stood on the table, and where the old rector stood awaiting them.

And still the strange, sudden panic held her in its gripe. She felt that she must fly from the place. She felt the crushing importance of the act she was about to perform, and her guardian angel was urging her to retreat before it was forever too late.

Yet—she did not fly. She did not retreat. She looked wistfully, eagerly, into her lover's face to read there only love and devotion and entreaty; and then, as if in a dream, she stood there by his side and the ceremony went on. As if in a trance she heard the questions and prompt responses of her lover. Almost without knowledge or volition of her own she answered suitably. And then Sydney Valence turned to her with a smile and a kiss.

"My wife! My dear, dear wife!"

It was done. Whatever had prompted her—folly, loneliness, over-persuasion, thoughtlessness, it was done! In a moment she had sown the seeds from which was to spring up a harvest of woe so terrible that even her wildest imagination could not have realized it. In a moment had been performed the act whose result would envelop her in the most utter darkness—whose shadow already cast its gray gloom of vague presentiment over her.

Once out of doors again, in the carriage which her husband's thoughtfulness had provided, Cecil turned solemnly to him.

"Oh, Sydney, have we done right? Everything seems so changed to me in these last few minutes that I cannot think it has been right. Sydney, tell me!"

He smiled in her grave, wistful blue eyes.

"It has been right, my darling. As you say, everything has changed—you and I are all the world to each other now, and from this hour I swear to you to love and protect and cherish you as you deserve. You will make a better man of me, Cecil, now that I shall come under your sweet, pure influence. Hereafter, my life shall contain nothing your pure, sweet eyes should not see. From to-day, I shall make my name one of which you shall be proud, little wife."

His voice was tender and grave, and his face was earnest and honest.

She listened, wonderingly.

"You make me afraid; your past life has not been what it should have been, Sydney?"

He flushed painfully as he held her slender, chill hands in his own.

"I will be frank with you, little girl. My past has not been what it should have been. Cecil, I have been wild, and fast, and dissipated, at times—when you look at me like that you make me feel how wickedly wrong and selfish I have been in persuading you to marry me; it was wrong, and yet, God knows you can save me and make a good man of me! I love you, Cecil, as purely, and sacredly, and truly as ever a woman was loved—how then can I be all, utterly bad? Oh, my darling, only forgive me for what I did before ever I knew you; only trust me and help me, and I swear you shall never regret this day!"

His dark, handsome face was passionate in its eager pleading; his low tones went home to her sympathetic heart.

"Sydney, I will trust you, and help you, and believe in you! I will not say I do not care because of the record of your past, but I will say I will not ask you to confess it to me. Let the future atone for it."

His voice was husky with emotion as he answered her:

"You shall know everything, my generous little wife. You shall know that drinking occasionally and gambling were my besetting sins. I have been an adventurer, Cecil, shiftless and lazy, but I swear to you that women have never been my prey. Weak I have been, and desperately wicked, but never—that way. And once Cecil—look at me with your sweet, shocked eyes that will lead me to goodness and virtue again—once, I committed a crime—don't start, don't!—once I forged my uncle's name, and rioted on the proceeds. Then it was that I was kicked out of house and home, and my twin-brother, my teacher in vice, my superior in magnificent treachery, who could do blackest deeds with an innocent face and plausible tongue, took my place—my brother, Cuthbert, whom I would curse but for your sorrowful eyes, Cecil."

She sat listening, white as death.

"Now tell me—do you utterly abhor me? I have left no sin unconfessed. You see me just as I am, in all my blackness, my penitence, my hopefulness. Will your woman's heart pity or cast me off? Can you still put your hand in mine, and forgive me, and trust me, and lead me to a better life?"

His lips were firm and set. His handsome face touchingly appealing, his eyes full of mute,

passionate, despairing love. And Cecil suddenly smiled and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Sydney, my husband, we will trust God for the future!"

And he leaned his head on her shoulder and sobbed—strong man that he was.

CHAPTER V.

A GLIMPSE OF PARADISE LOST.

THE little depôt at Marchbrook was lonely and desolate enough when Sydney Valence and his bride alighted from the carriage, and he paid and dismissed the driver.

On the platform were Cecil's trunks, labeled in full with the name to which she nevermore could lay claim. Around, as far as one could see in the semi-darkness of the early dusk, lay the unbroken fields of snow, through which the railway tracks wound blackly like twin serpents writhing their way along. Inside the small building a youth was sitting in the ticket-office, waiting for any chance traveler who might require his services.

Sydney Valence bought two tickets for New York and secured checks for the luggage, and then they walked up and down the platform waiting for the train that was to take them into the new life that had opened so suddenly before them.

It was only a few minutes before the train came along; only a moment's delay while the trunks were tossed aboard, and then Cecil realized, as she had not even yet realized, that of a truth the old life was done, the new one beginning.

Through the darkness the train dashed along, never once halting in its speed, until, away on toward the gray dawn of the morning, the city was reached and the passengers went their various ways, and Sydney Valence and his bride started for a hotel where rest and breakfast could be had.

"I will get a carriage, while you remain here in the waiting-room. I will not be long, and soon you will be comfortable once more."

He smiled brightly in her pale, tired, lovely face as he ensconced her in a quiet corner of the big half-lighted room, then went on his errand.

It seemed as if he never would come back. Cecil was positive he had been gone a long, long while beyond what was needed for his purpose; she looked at her watch again and again, and at length, in a vague, wondering terror went to the street door of the depôt—to meet a policeman on his way in, who instantly addressed her:

"If you are the lady who is looking for Mr. Valence, you will find him in the druggist's half a block up. It's a great pity, madam, that it happened just as it did. Maybe you'd rather not see him just now?"

Her white, wondering face seemed suddenly to appeal to him.

"Happened? What has happened to Mr. Valence? What do you mean?"

He looked compassionately at her.

"It was a street scrimmage, lady—the young man met some of his old companions right out here, and it seems he wanted to give them the go-by, but they wouldn't allow it, and some high words followed, and then somebody said something about 'it had been all found out,' and the first any one knew, the young gentleman out with his revolver and shot himself, and they carried him into the drug store."

Cecil stood like a dazed creature, listening to the almost incredible story. Shot himself! Sydney Valence dead, perhaps, or dying! A cold slow terror gathered around her very heart as she tried to think of it.

"Is—he—dead?"

She faltered at the words, remembering as she did so, that it must have been some of his earlier sins that had thus caused whatever had happened—poor fellow, those sins he had so honestly confessed, so penitently promised to forswear!

The officer looked pityingly at the white, horrified face.

"Dead, ma'am, beyond the shadow of a doubt."

And then, with those words ringing their cadence through her bewildered brain, she sunk in a heap to the floor, completely prostrated by this last blow from the hand of a cruel Fate. What followed immediately in that dreadful time, she never knew. Whether or not there was an inquest no one ever told her, and she never asked, when, weeks and weeks afterward, she awoke to consciousness in the hospital to which she had been taken, nameless, friendless,

sick unto death, utterly desolate—she, the pet of a lovely home, the caressed darling of wealth and luxury.

At the first, upon her return to consciousness, she remembered nothing, but gradually she realized it all, and comprehended her position—the wife of a man who had committed suicide for a reason she would never know.

"But to save me," she persisted in telling herself. "It was to save me from some disgrace that he sacrificed his life; it was the thought of how those bitterly repented sins would ruin and blight me, that decided him to sacrifice himself to spare me! I know it, I feel it! Oh, Sydney, my poor, loving, brave Sydney!"

They were Cecil's first consecutive thoughts in the days when, a weak, trembling convalescent from the terrible brain fever, she sat in her easy-chair and began anew to bear the burden of life.

And her pale face would grow still more pitifully pale, and her lips more resolute, as she thought out the future that lay before her.

"No one ever need know of that hasty secret marriage. My conscience told me then it was imprudent, if not wicked; now I know why those dark forebodings chilled my very soul. But no one need ever know it. It would do no one any good—it can do me no harm to keep my own pitiful secret. I will retain my name—ah! what is my name? not Valence, not May—what is my name?"

The sudden little self-questioning cut her to the very heart. Of a truth, what name was hers?

Her lips quivered as her sad meditation went on.

"I will try to forget I was Sydney Valence's wife, even in name, for those few short hours. I will take back the name I have always borne, and, with my secret my own, I will go out alone into the world, trying to find what my duty to myself is, and trusting God to care for me."

Renewed health and increasing strength confirmed her judgment in the decision she had formed. She was resolved to bury the episode in her life, the knowledge of which could never affect any one for the better or wiser. As the days went on, and her naturally keen mind recovered all its clearness and comprehensiveness, she was more and more convinced that her hasty marriage had been a dangerous experiment, and that Sydney Valence's death was a deliverance. She came to understand that his was not the character she could love truly, and honor and reverence; she came to fully appreciate all the misery that would have come to her, as his wife, in all human probability, and when the time came for her to go out into the world, with health and strength restored, she was satisfied that she had escaped, almost providentially, from a life she shuddered to contemplate.

And yet there were none but kindly, pitiful feelings in her heart for the dead man, who, whatever his faults, certainly had loved her.

"I can never forget that—never, and how he trusted me so unreservedly! And although I do not regret his death for my own sake, I believe I cared for him enough to make it impossible for me to ever love again."

So, with her young heart burdened with its strange, unyouthful load, fair Cecil went forth from the friendly walls of the hospital where she had been not unhappy, and so kindly cared for, where her means had furnished her many a luxury, and always privacy and exclusive attention—out into the world, with twenty dollars in her pocket-book between her and hunger and homelessness.

It was a lovely day when she started forth on her brave, determined quest for something to do which should keep her from encroaching on her precious little fund. A lovely day even for New York, where it takes a great deal of balmy air and golden sunshine, even in spring-time, to make glad and bright its dusty, crowded thoroughfares. And the day was exquisitely beautiful—a day in earliest spring, with a cloudless sky blue as the girl's eyes, and sunshine flooding everywhere, golden as her hair.

She was passing fair to see as she walked along Broadway, bound for an Intelligence Bureau she had seen advertised in that morning's *Herald*. Her long, long illness had left her even more delicately lovely than before, if that were possible, while the trouble she had undergone had added a sweeter, graver patience to her proud, spirited eyes.

She was modestly dressed in black cashmere, and she wore a dainty little black felt hat, that drooped slightly over the short, golden hair crept on her white forehead. She was young

and straight and fair, the very ideal of loveliness and girlish grace, a pure, sweet flower fit to bloom in highest places.

She walked along, neither leisurely nor hurriedly, all unconscious of the glances of admiration that met and followed, until, so suddenly it almost startled her, she heard her name pronounced, and saw a gentleman halt immediately in front of her.

"Miss May! Is it possible? Can it really be you, or am I mistaken?"

And a faint little flush, half surprise, half delight at sight of a familiar face, tinged her cheeks as she extended her hand to his own eagerly-offered one.

"Mr. Carriscourt, it is really I myself."

He looked searchingly in her face.

"I am not so sure of that, Miss Cecil. Have you been ill? Or, will you allow me to ask you, where have you been all these months since you left Marchbrook so unceremoniously?"

The kindly solicitude in his tones touched a tender chord in the girl's heart, so long unused had she been to sympathetic words. Her lips quivered, and tears sprang to her eyes, both of which emotions she quickly, bravely controlled.

Mr. Carriscourt led her quietly to the edge of the pavement, and opened the door of a *coupé* standing there.

"I want to talk with you, Miss Cecil. Get inside, and we will take a quiet drive to Central Park."

He assisted her in, and gave his order to the coachman, and then took the seat beside her.

"Now, consider me your friend and confessor. Tell me—why did you leave Marchbrook directly after your father's death, and where have you been all this while? Trust me, wholly, will you not?"

His grandly-handsome face was thoughtful, yet radiant with the delight of having so unexpectedly met this girl whom he loved better than his own life. His splendid eyes, darkly-gray, tender as a woman's, yet full of a masterful, strengthful consciousness, were bent on her pure pale face. His strong, firm hands had taken her trembling fingers in a warm, friendly grasp, and so he waited for his answer, that came in low, tremulous tones:

"I am well aware you are my friend, Mr. Carriscourt, and that you were one of papa's—Judge May's—dearest friends. I do not hesitate to answer your kindly questions for any reason except that it—it—hurts me to recall the reasons why I left dear Marchbrook. Mr. Carriscourt, I am not what you suppose me to be—I am not Judge May's own child. I do not know who or what I am. I am—nobody, homeless, friendless and nameless."

Her voice failed in a husky whisper, and she involuntarily shrunk away from him.

His splendid eyes grew misty and tender as he listened courteously, then smiled caressingly upon her.

"My dear little girl, did you think to horrify me with your pitiful little story? I have known for years you were only an adopted daughter of the judge. Do you think it would make the least difference in the regard of any true friend? Listen to me. You remember I spoke to Judge May before his death of my love for you, and besought him to give his consent to my addresses to you. I loved you, Cecil, better than any woman I ever had seen. I feared lest I might be too precipitate in my wooing of you, and yet I ventured to lay my dearest wishes before the judge, for I hoped it might be possible you loved me, or could love me. If I loved you then I love you a thousandfold more now in your friendlessness and loneliness. If I had a thousand lives to give you I would do it! Cecil, I love you, I love you! I want you to come to me, my darling, and be my wife! Will you do it?"

His eager voice broke through all restraint of will, and thrilled in a fervor of intensest passion on the girl's ears. He reached out his arms to caress her, but her blue eyes made him hesitate, so full of anguish and despair were they.

"Oh, Mr. Carriscourt, no, no! Please, no!"

She whispered her answer, huskily.

"Cecil! Then I am repulsive to you! The one darling this world holds for me, you tell me 'no, no,' with quivering lips and horror-stricken eyes! Oh, Cecil!"

His voice fairly vibrated with sudden heart-sick doubt that smote her to the very soul.

"Not that, Mr. Carriscourt! How could I be repelled, when you are so good, so good to me! It is not that, but—but—"

A slow, strange ecstasy was creeping over her, almost terrifying her. What did it mean? Was it—could it be possible the electric tones

in his impassioned voice, the deep intensity of feeling in his eager eyes had touched a chord in her heart she never knew had existed, and not only touched that unknown, hidden chord, but sent it thrilling in blissful unison with the master touch?

In her very uttermost soul she had not dreamed she ever had cared for Mr. Carriscourt. For years she had known him as a friend; she had always admired him for his qualities which could not have failed to command admiration; she had known and seen him the handsome, distinguished-looking gentleman he was, with his clear, keen principles of right, his bright, grand intelligence, his brave nobility of soul, his tender chivalrousness of heart and exquisitely winning grace of manner.

And yet, never once, in all the years of his acquaintance at Judge May's house had it ever occurred to her to love him—not even when, to her surprise, she heard he had proposed for her in marriage. But now—a sudden, strange, inexplicable sweetness seized her, and in all the honesty of her young soul, the truth shone out of her blue eyes for one startlingly blessed minute, while Mr. Carriscourt's anxious face and pleading eyes were bent upon her.

Then her quick, faltering answer was spoken, and as by some divination, he read all the truth of her heart, and his countenance lighted radiantly.

"My darling! You do love me! Come to me, Cecil!"

And as his arms opened to receive her, all her new sudden happiness glowed in her face and smiled from her blue eyes. Her beautiful head drooped nearer him, almost touching his breast, and then, all of a sudden she recoiled, and the smile vanished from her eyes and lips, and despair and pain took their place.

"Mr. Carriscourt—I—I—love you, but I cannot—I must not—oh, I must not let you love me!"

"You must not, darling? But if you cannot help it? Listen. Your father—he whom you loved and obeyed as your father—gave me his cordial consent and God-speed to my wooing of you. You, dear, admit you love me—your sweet eyes would have told me that even had not your tongue confessed. You are alone, friendless, homeless. I have a beautiful home waiting for you; is it reasonable for you to declare I must not hope to have you for my beloved wife? If you think I care for the few months of your absence, where you were—so that you were well cared for—you are mistaken. My darling, if those months hold any secret, it is your own, and you shall religiously keep it. I know you never did an act or entertained a thought that was not purity and nobleness itself. I am satisfied—I love you, oh, my lovely little girl. You are all life holds of worth to me, my darling. You love me—you do! Now, my dearest, my love—look up and tell me you are all my very, very own from this moment!"

His face was gloriously alight with the tender mighty passion that swayed her soul equally with his own. He moved nearer her, and placed his arms around her waist, and drew her head to his shoulder, despite her piteous efforts to resist him. He pushed off her hat, and gently caressed her forehead.

"My own darling! I am waiting for your answer. Ah, Cecil, I shall take this sweet silence for consent—that you are my betrothed wife. Dearest, lift your face!"

He stooped to kiss her lips in passionate eagerness, but she suddenly broke from his circling arms, and retreated to the furthest corner of the carriage, her blue eyes agonized, her hands wringing hopelessly, as the memory of that other marriage rose up between them.

"Oh, Mr. Carriscourt—no—no! I cannot, I cannot! I should not have permitted myself to admit I loved you, but—I never, never can marry you! Oh, never!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE FIRST LINK IN THE CHAIN OF FATE.

THE library in Mr. Griffith Pemberton's Fifth avenue mansion was brilliantly lighted, and warm, and temptingly cosy, and Cuthbert Pemberton, stretched at full length on a green damask sofa, with his bold, handsome eyes steadily regarding a middle-aged man who sat opposite him, was thinking of the pleasant places in which his lines of Fate had fallen.

The middle-aged man was Mr. Pemberton's business agent and confidential servant, Hiram Fletcher, who had been in his master's employ ever since he had been a boy, and Griffith Pemberton a few years older.

He was a quiet, intelligent, rather good-look-

ing man, who always dressed suitably and well, and who had in the long course of his service amassed quite a little sum of money which, by prudence and shrewdness in speculation, had increased of late years until it was very generally understood that unless he had so chosen, it was not in the least necessary for him to continue in Mr. Pemberton's employ.

But—he quickly put aside all suggestions from any source, and told his employer, with whom he was on those trusted, friendly terms that only long years of patient servitude can warrant, that so long as his services were acceptable and useful, he preferred to remain.

Whether or not it was for a reason that he never had uttered, or would wish to have betrayed, will remain to be seen.

Fletcher and Cuthbert Pemberton were on excellent terms. More than once the young man had borrowed money to tide him over a "streak of ill-luck," and if Fletcher knew the character and life of fast young gentlemen, he certainly kept his knowledge to himself, and was always respectful, without being servile.

"Tell me all about her, Fletcher," young Pemberton said, stretching his supple, handsome figure lazily on the sofa. "The old gentleman will be in directly, and I want to hear all about it before he comes."

Fletcher looked thoughtfully in the glowing bed of coals just beside him.

"Well, Mr. Cuthbert, there isn't so very much to tell, after all. You know your uncle and I journeyed to Italy on the same apparently hopeless quest that has occupied so much of our time—and you have heard Mr. Pemberton say that, very strangely, very miraculously, I may say, it turned out that the last clew was a correct one, and we traced it, in and out, until—we have found the object of the search of years—the living daughter of Mr. Pemberton's dead sister, the young girl who will be the heiress of the noblest fortune, one of the finest estates in America."

Cuthbert lay quietly watching the keen, intelligent face of Fletcher as it lighted up almost triumphantly—doubtless at the thought of the success "that had crowned so many hitherto futile efforts."

"But how did you find her, Fletcher? Have you seen her? Are you sure, absolutely sure, she is the child of Mr. Pemberton's deceased sister?"

Fletcher's face relaxed into a slow smile, and he caressed his well-trimmed whiskers complacently.

"There is not the shadow of a doubt, Mr. Cuthbert. We have always known that Mr. Pemberton's sister died at Florence, leaving a child about two or three years old, and from that city every clew has started, only to prove cruelly false. This time, however, I myself struck a sudden and unexpected trail, for which I had been hoping for years. I discovered an old woman who remembered the dead lady, and who put me on the right track, after so many, many years. Step by step I traced my way, until, a week after Mr. Pemberton sailed for home, I found the girl, made all the necessary arrangements to have her sent to us, and followed in the very next steamer."

The gleam of intense interest deepened in Cuthbert's eyes.

"Tell me about her! Is she pretty? Is she well-bred, or has she been brought up in ignorance and vulgarity?"

Fletcher's sallow cheeks flushed a trifle under the pointed questions.

"She has been fortunate in the extreme. From papers and letters her mother left, it was evident to the woman to whose charge she was given—a Miss Ogden, a very worthy middle-aged lady, who will accompany her as maid hereafter—that the child belonged to a family of note and wealth, although no name was given anywhere among the memoranda. Acting upon that belief, and the child being remarkably bright, and attractive and pretty, and perhaps also from motives of policy, extra care was given her, and the result is that Mr. Pemberton's niece and heiress is amply fitted by education and manners to take the position to which her birth entitles her."

During the deliberate recital of the details, Fletcher's keen eyes had never once left young Pemberton's face, and all the increasing interest and eagerness was plainly evident to him.

"Yes! Well—spare me any more particulars, Fletcher; I want to know how she looks. How old is she?"

"She is between seventeen and eighteen, Mr. Cuthbert. She is tall, and as graceful as a gazelle, with a supple, willowy figure that will enchant you. She has black eyes, liquid and love-

ly, and a creamy fair skin, and fair hair—a combination of personal charms as rare as beautiful. She sings and plays and dances, and, altogether, I think you will not find it very difficult to reconcile yourself to the fact that a second cousin has stepped in between you and the fortune you so confidently expected."

A dark, malignant look swept across the young man's face.

"It would go against the grain of the most patient man in the world to be thus set aside, although the old gentleman assures me it will make no material difference to me. And, by Jove, it shall not make much difference, although the remedy is almost as bad as the complaint, for I detest the idea of matrimonial shackles. All the same, Fletcher—I'm determined to marry my beautiful cousin, and thus secure the fortune in the family, at least."

An odd, swift smile played on Fletcher's thin lips.

"I see I have succeeded in awakening your admiration for the heiress, Mr. Cuthbert. Well, in my opinion, if you will allow its expression, it is just and natural, and right that you should take the view you do. I, myself, would like to see the property remain in the family, and if I can be of any service to you—you have only to command me."

Cuthbert laughed.

"Thanks, Fletcher. I suppose the young lady is heart-whole? And yet, with such beauty and attractiveness, it would be rather astonishing."

"She is entirely heart-whole, Miss Ogden assures me. I think you have a fair field, and, sir, you ought to win."

"One question more: when is my cousin expected to arrive?"

Firm, prompt footsteps just outside the library door prevented Fletcher's reply, and both he and Cuthbert arose as Mr. Griffith Pemberton entered the room.

His grand face was alight with excitement, and his frosty blue eyes were shining with an agitation that was very unusual.

"The cablegram has just arrived, Fletcher. Your arrangements were perfect. Cuthbert—congratulations are in order. Your cousin, Elma, my niece and heiress, has to-day sailed from Liverpool. In a few more days she will have arrived at her rightful home, and this great house will know what it is to be lighted by a girl's voice and merry laugh. Fletcher, I never can repay you for what you have done for me, in this affair. You have lightened my later years, and lifted a burden I never dared hope would be lifted, in finding my sister's child!"

He extended his hand in an impulse of warm friendliness and gratitude, and Fletcher respectfully took it, then dropped it, courteously.

"I always try to serve you, Mr. Pemberton. Duty brings its own reward. Do I understand you that Miss Pemberton sails to-day?"

"In the Scythia. And there is very much to be done before she arrives. I want the western suit of rooms on the second floor thoroughly overhauled and refurnished. Go to Punitan tomorrow, Fletcher, and have him come and look at them, and give him *carte blanche* to decorate them in the handsomest manner imaginable. Give him a description of my niece's *personnel*, and let him be strictly particular as to the colors and style most becoming to her."

Fletcher quietly took the elaborate order down in his memorandum-book.

"Will there be anything further?" he asked, pausing, pencil in hand.

"Yes," laughed Cuthbert, as he leaned against the low silver mantel, "I am sure Mr. Pemberton will never forgive himself if he hasn't the wardrobe full of toilets when our fairy princess comes. Honestly, sir, you ought to get a modiste to make some dresses for my cousin. A description of her style and figure can be very accurately obtained from Fletcher here I am sure."

Mr. Pemberton smiled.

"A good idea, my boy. Yes, Fletcher, see a fashionable artiste, and have all that is necessary for a young lady's outfit; mind, everything, from top to toe—arranged and delivered here by next Thursday. And if there's anything else you can think of that will serve to show my niece how thoroughly welcome she is, see to it—any little delicate attentions in the way of flowers, or jewelry, or anything that young girls like."

And so, very grand preparations were made to receive this fortunate young girl, where it hardly seemed possible that improvement could be suggested.

It was a lovely suit of rooms that awaited

Elma Pemberton's coming—rooms that would have been exquisite enough for royalty.

There were three *en suite*—the front one being designed for her sitting-room, with lofty ceilings painted a delicious pallid pink relieved by a narrow silver cornice. A pink-and-pearl Aubusson carpet covered the floor. Lace curtains and pink silk subdued the light from the balconied windows. Lovely pictures hung on the walls, suspended by silver cords. Little brackets supported statuettes in Parian and bronze; odd little marble-topped tables held books; an inlaid writing-desk, superbly supplied; silver and crystal vases for flowers; the mantle-shelf was ornamented with two or three little articles of *bijouterie*; a pink silken couch protected with a white swiss cover, a couple of low easy-chairs, a small piano and accompanying well-filled music portfolio, made the large apartment magnificent and luxurious as the most cultured taste would wish.

Adjoining was the dressing-room—with marble bath and every imaginable toilet luxury, its floor covered by a thick, snow-white rug into which the feet sunk deeply.

And at the rear of the *suite*, looking out on the elegant garden, was the large, commodious sleeping-room, with its dressing-suit of ivory-white celluloid, its carpet of white just touched with faint blush-pink, its snowy lace and silk draperies, its pink-and-silver dressing-case ornaments, its beautiful cushioned *prie-dieu* in a dusky corner draped off by a silken canopy.

Luxury and magnificence unlimited, awaiting the girl whose life was unfolding like a wild romance, whose warp and woof of destiny were already becoming strangely entangled with the threads of other lives of whom she never even had heard.

CHAPTER VII.

A SWEET TEMPTATION.

THE carriage in which Clyde Carriscourt and Cecil were sitting went easily, steadily on into the fresh beauty of Central Park—and yet, despite the perfection of the day, the exhilaration of the sweet, pure air, the loveliness of everything about them, poor Cecil's face was full of the pain and misery that were busy at work.

Since she had uttered her piteous, passionate answer to Mr. Carriscourt's appeal, she had not said another word, but sat back in a corner of the carriage, with her pale, sweet face and dreamy eyes making his heart ache to take her in his arms, and kiss away the wretchedness she felt.

For several minutes he did not speak, but sat looking thoughtfully through the open window, until, directly, he turned toward her again, his face full of tenderest compassion, his voice thrilling with sweetness and gentleness that made all Cecil's pulses quicken in response.

"I cannot satisfy myself with your answer, Cecil. Will I annoy you if I ask you two or three questions? Can you be forbearing, and answer me?"

Questions! Her face grew a shade paler. It seemed to her as if he was about to uncover the secret she would guard with her life.

She bowed in silent assent. Yes, he might ask her, but it never must pass her lips.

"You have let me know you loved me, Cecil. Answer me this—are you sure you do? You do not mistake friendship—or possibly a feeling of impulsive gratitude—for the true deep love I ask in return for mine? Because it seems to me, little one, that if you truly loved me, you would not with the next breath refuse to give yourself to me."

He had suggested the only means of escape for her—to admit she might have mistaken a grateful impulse for affection.

She looked at him a second, and her sweet voice quivered as she answered:

"I—I—am afraid it is not as you wish, Mr. Carriscourt. I—do not—"

But, truthful to the soul as Cecil was, she could not utter the falsehood. She hesitated, and his eager, kindly face shadowed.

"Well then, dear, I will accept your answer—you do not love me, after all. But, Cecil—do you care for any one else?"

Her answer came prompt enough.

"Oh, no, no, I do not!"

A part of that grave shadow lifted off his face.

"Thank God for that! Cecil, again—as honestly as ever you spoke a word in your life—do you feel any repulsion or dislike, or indifference toward me?"

And he could not restrain the eager anxiety in his tones while he spoke, watching her lovely, expressive face.

"Oh, Mr. Carriscourt, how would it be possible for me to have any such feelings toward you? Indeed, indeed, you are the nearest, dearest friend to me in all the world, and—"

A smile of exultation brightened all over his face.

"It is not a step from there to the love that will come, Cecil, to the love that must come, persuaded by such love as I can give you. You admit you like me better than any one else—and, now that I come to think of it, how do you know but that the sweet pure friendship you can give me is not love itself? What should a maiden like you know of the mighty passion that I feel for you, that sways and controls my whole heart, and governs my very life? Cecil, without knowing it, I believe you do love me, my honest, darling little girl."

He was caressing her hand now, smiling, pleading with his eyes as he looked at her drooped face—a look she felt, though she dared not meet it.

She sat and listened—such tumult of thought surging over her.

"What shall I say? What ought I to do?" she asked herself, confusedly. "He loves me—I know he loves me, and it would be so sweet, so restful, to accept the protection and cherishing affection such a home would offer to me in my utter loneliness. I know I could make him happy. I know I would be as happy as his wife as I ever can expect to be with the secret I must carry with me as long as I live. I wonder—" and her heart gave a fierce, suffocating throb—"I wonder what he would say if I were to tell him?"

She dared not lift her eyes for so much as a shy glance at his face.

And just at that moment he spoke.

"Well, my darling? Shall I tempt you further? Shall I tell you of the bright, beautiful life you shall have at Carris Court, with every surrounding as congenial as your lovely home at Marchbrook was? I am a rich man, Cecil, and can amply afford to indulge all your fancies and wishes, and it will be the pleasure of my life to make you happy. We will travel if you prefer, or occupy my city residence in winter and spend the summer between Carris Court and the fashionable resorts. Come to me, my darling; share what I have; honor me by being my wife—for it is an honor, a great honor that you would bestow."

An honor—and she the wife of—!

Some protest trembled on her lips, but he silenced her, authoritatively, lovingly:

"Do not say me nay, Cecil! Because you are a poor girl—because you are not the daughter of an aristocratic, influential man, is less than nothing to me. Of course I deeply, truly respect an honest, decent lineage, and your manner, your appearance, prove you are of such, my little girl. Nothing but disgrace, or a vile connection, would make me respect and love you less, my pure little star-eyes, and those, we both know, are as incompatible with you as degradation with an angel. Cecil—" and of a sudden his patient, reasoning tone changed into quick, passionate eagerness, "I must have my answer. And it must be yes!"

And she had thought to confess to him, for one insane moment!

For one minute her thoughts ran confusedly:

"Papa wished it to be so—have I any reasonable grounds for persisting in making Mr. Carriscourt unhappy, and myself lonely and wretched? Poor Sydney is dead; the marriage was but in name; it will never be discovered; there is really nothing but my own sentiment to prevent my marrying Mr. Carriscourt. I dare not test him—I dare not go to him with the fact in my heart that I am—"

A look of desperation was in her blue eyes as she suddenly raised them.

"I cannot," she wailed out, sharply. "I am not worthy—I am too faulty—I—"

And he silenced the anguished outcry of her poor, struggling heart, by folding her in his arms.

"Your self-styled unworthiness is perfection to me, and your sweetly-confessed faultiness just what I want. My Cecil, you are mine! My little betrothed bride."

And, overcome by her own arguments, overwhelmed by this lover's mighty passion, Cecil suffered him to kiss her quivering lips over and over again.

"If ever you should repent," she said, wistfully.

He smiled, confidently.

"Repent? Oh, my darling, my own darling, you have yet to understand how dearly I love you! There is no repentance for us—we will be too happy."

And so Cecil put away that dark, yet guiltless episode of her girlish heart, and, as was perfectly natural, after the tempest of unrest and uncertainty through which she had passed was over, there came a new, sweet calm and peace to her that rejoiced her own heart and delighted her lover's in those few days that intervened between the betrothal and the immediate marriage on which Mr. Carriscourt insisted.

He found a pleasant, retired boarding-place for her, whose price she was able to pay from her own tiny fund, and while she remained there those intervening days Mr. Carriscourt went back to Carris Court to prepare for the coming of his bride—with his heart swelling with rapturous delight and sweetest anticipations as he went from room to room, suggesting here, altering there, so that everything might be as nearly perfect as possible for this dainty little girl he loved so truly, so tenderly.

While Cecil stayed quietly in the pleasant little home prepared for her—a charming room fronting on one of the avenues, where she could see all that was passing, and where more than one passer-by had involuntarily glanced the second time at the pure, dainty face at the lace-draped window—and among them was Cuthbert Pemberton.

"She's the most superb creature I ever saw in my life," he said, enthusiast cally at dinner, the very first day of Cecil's abode in her temporary home, and Mr. Pemberton had smiled at the unusual animation in this *blasé* young gentleman's tone and manner.

"Reserve your heart until to-morrow," he said, as he pushed his tiny glass for the sparkling Moselle. "To-morrow Elma arrives."

Cuthbert filled the glass slowly.

"I wish you could see this exquisite girl," he went on; "she is the most superb creature I ever saw in my life, and that is saying a great deal. She is a perfect pronounced blonde, sir, with the most entrancing face I can imagine. I have already driven past several times purposely to see her—I would like you to go yourself, simply to have the pleasure of seeing the most perfect face in the world."

"You infect me with your enthusiasm, Cuthbert. Suppose we drive past to-morrow, simply, as you say, to gratify my eyes by such a vision of loveliness. But I will confess I have only eyes for the girl who is coming to-morrow, whom Fletcher pronounces rarely lovely."

The next day, at the same hour at which Cuthbert Pemberton had several times before seen Cecil's face at the window, and always drooped over some book she was reading, the Pemberton carriage drove slowly by, and Mr. Griffith Pemberton fully indorsed his nephew's opinion.

"It is the most perfect face I ever saw, Cuthbert! I would give half I possess to find Elma as beautiful as that girl! Who can she be?"

Cuthbert smiled.

"I was not exaggerative in my report, then? She must be a stranger, for I am sure I should have known such a face anywhere the second time. I have made inquiries, but as yet learned nothing. But I do not despair of finding out her name."

Cuthbert had leaned back in his seat after his one eager, admiring look at the pure, high-bred face, with its drooped, long-lashed lids. His face was momentarily averted, and in that one second, while Mr. Griffith Pemberton was still gravely, respectfully gazing at her, Cecil suddenly looked up, and the full light of her glorious eyes met his, in one straight, steady glance.

And the carriage passed on, every nerve in Mr. Pemberton's frame vibrating from that glance.

"My boy—it is the sweetest, purest face I ever saw! Her eyes are blue as a sapphire, and soft as velvet, and full of a wistfulness and enchanting modesty that went straight to my old heart as no eyes have done this many a year."

Cuthbert laughed.

"Take care, sir!"

Mr. Pemberton looked gravely at him.

"It is not that," he said, quietly. "I feel that I would like to know more of her, hear her speak. I could worship such a girl, and I have no higher hope than that Elma may be like her. My dear little Elma! In two hours I shall see her—to think of it! And yet I am full of a shrinking fear lest Fletcher's report has been overcolored and the child I am prepared to love and cherish better than my own life may prove not what I want. Yet—she is Genevieve's child!"

"And I shall marry her," Cuthbert said, in his own heart, as the carriage rolled on, "I

shall marry her, no matter what she is—and yet my pulses stirred—as they never stirred before—at sight of that woman's other face at the window yonder. I have loved many women—but—this glorious creature has somehow made me feel that all other loves would be a farce compared with what I could feel for her. I must find out all about her! I must know who she is! And then—"

There was an eager look in his dark eyes, and a complaisant smile on his dusk-mustached lips.

While Cecil, sitting still beside the window, had dropped her book and was gazing thoughtfully out, not seeing the passing promenaders.

"What a magnificent face that was! Can I ever have seen it before, I wonder? Such nobility, such haughtiness and yet such gentleness seems somehow strangely familiar to me. I suppose I have seen such a face before on the street."

And it was a long while before she could entirely dismiss the sensation of which she had been conscious when Mr. Pemberton had looked her in the eyes with his own.

CHAPTER VIII.

WAS SHE HIS NIECE?

THE beauty of the bright, mild, mid-winter day had changed suddenly into the gloomy cloudiness that a sharp, biting north-east wind brings. The bank of somber clouds that had been slowly gathering and lying low in the horizon had overspread all the sky, and the lovely sunshine and genial south wind had vanished as if at command of a magician's wand.

The Pemberton mansion was all ablaze with lights at the earliest dusk. Within its walls was no sign or suspicion of the raw, bleak weather outside.

Flowers from the conservatory were placed in costly vases about the room, and banked in rich, fragrant profusion on low tables, in circular form on the magnificent mantle-pieces; vines, that swayed their tender green leaves and tiny starry flowers, hung from brackets and crystal globes, and were artistically wreathed about the massive frames of pictures and several exquisite statuettes in shadowy niches.

The magnificent suit of drawing-rooms had all been thrown into one continuous apartment, divided into the three proper, by the velvet *portières* that draped so gracefully and artistically. Floods of light streamed from the great cluster of chandeliers over the pale blue and lemon velvet carpet, that covered the entire suit, and that was in one entire piece. The coverings from the furniture were removed, revealing the lustrous magnificence of the blue velvet upholstery, puffed with lemon satin that was in the front drawing-room, the lemon damask that was in the middle room, and the elegant, odd pieces of French and Italian styles, whose prevailing tints were *en suite* with the others.

The blue satin golden-lined curtains draped the plate-glass windows that opened on a wide, iron-railed balcony that, in early summer days, before the house was closed for the fashionable season abroad, was handsomely ornamented with growing plants, and vines, with easy camp-chairs in secluded recesses, and over all a gay, wide awning.

Mr. Griffith Pemberton, in full evening dress, walked up and down the long suit of rooms, waiting to receive the child of his dead sister, the fortunate girl who was coming to a life of elegance and luxury such as even her wildest imagination had not supposed possible in real, everyday life.

An hour before, the clarence had been sent, in charge of Fletcher, to meet the travelers at the steamship wharf, and it was reasonable to expect them at any moment now.

Everything was in readiness, and Mr. Pemberton's frosty, handsome blue eyes were full of eager impatience as he walked slowly up and down, listening for the roll of carriage-wheels at his door.

"I wonder what she will be like?" he asked himself, in those last moments of expectation and uncertainty. "Will she be another Genevieve, lovely and amiable, high-spirited and proud with the genuine old Pemberton pride that tears only to do wrong? Will she be high-bred and distinguished and loving and charming as my sister was, or—" and a savage, bitter look came into his face, and he involuntarily quickened his steps, and stroked his white mustache in fierce agitation—"or will she be like—her father, a smiling, treacherous scoundrel, lazy and unprincipled, who richly deserved the death he died after the life of dissipation he led—after the life of heart-broken pain he caused my sister? One look at her face, one syllable of

her voice will decide whether I shall take her to my heart, or only endure her."

The minutes ticked rapidly off; the wind howled dismally around the stately mansion, and surged with a shrill wail through the park opposite. Mr. Pemberton grew more impatient, and a look of vexation came into his eyes.

"Cuthbert should have been here to receive my niece—no business, no engagement should have been too pressing to have kept him on this occasion. Ah!"

The little sharp ejaculation escaped him involuntarily, for the unmistakable sound of carriage-wheels stopping at his door made his eyes lighten and his heart beat faster for a moment.

Then, the door was opened widely by the hall porter, and Mr. Pemberton caught a passing glimpse of two veiled ladies, in plain traveling attire, escorted by Fletcher, who said a few words to the housekeeper and a young maid-servant, who were in respectful waiting in the little reception-room on the opposite side of the hall, and who immediately led the way to the rooms in readiness, followed by the young stranger heiress and her attendant.

A second later Fletcher received his order from Mr. Pemberton to come into the drawing-room.

"She has come, I see, Fletcher," were his first words, spoken with an agitation unusual to him. "But why did she not at once come to me? You should have brought her to me at once."

"It would have been not quite suitable, sir, I think. Miss Pemberton is travel-stained and somewhat fatigued, and, as she naturally prefers that your first impression should be favorable, she requested to be allowed to rest a few moments and make a change in her toilet."

"Oh, very well," Mr. Pemberton returned, a little impatiently, "I dare say it is all exceedingly right and proper, but I should have thought Genevieve's child would have come straight to my arms."

Fletcher saw the slight frown on the stern, handsome face, and hastened to dissipate it.

"Pardon me, Mr. Pemberton, but a household of men, such as this is, cannot be expected to know the necessities and requisites of young ladies. It will be a glorious thing for you, sir, that Miss Pemberton has come. It will be like living to have a young girl's fair face to look at, her voice to hear, to have the charming token a woman's actual presence all over this great, magnificent place. It will make a young man of you again, sir, to be entertaining and escorting your beautiful niece, to be her confidant in her girlish joys and griefs."

Mr. Pemberton smiled briefly.

"Yes, and you put it very poetically. Evidently my niece has infatuated you, Fletcher. Well—how much longer will I be obliged to wait before I have the pleasure of seeing her?"

Fletcher instantly arose to bring her; that sarcasm of impatience in Mr. Pemberton's voice warned him that it was time to effectually appease the rising vexation.

"She must be ready now, sir. I will bring her—"

"And her attendant, too. I want to see this Miss Ogden at the same time."

Fletcher went directly up the stairs to the door of the front room of Miss Pemberton's suit. His knock was at once answered by Miss Ogden, a tall, ladylike woman, with fairly good-looking face, intelligent, shrewd, resolute. Her hair was becomingly and fashionably arranged, her traveling dress had already been exchanged for a stylish, modest toilet of dark-brown silk. She wore laces at her neck and wrists, and carried a watch and chain. She was quiet, and perfectly self-possessed—a lady who was apparently admirably fitted to occupy the position she held.

She met Fletcher with a slight, pleasant bow.

"Will you come in? Elma is not quite ready to go down to see Mr. Pemberton yet."

A look of concern spread over his face.

"It will not do to keep him waiting longer. Already his patience is exhausted. He is a man accustomed to have everything his own way, as I have told you, and Miss Pemberton cannot too soon be thoroughly instructed so."

The look of anxiety on his face was reflected in Miss Ogden's as she rapped on the door of the dressing and toilet-room.

It was opened by the young girl herself, and as many times as Fletcher had seen her since he had discovered her, he actually started in astonishment at the radiant vision of youth and grace and beauty and *hauteur*.

She had had her maid dress her in full evening dress of white swiss and white silk, that mar-

velously enhanced the ivory fairness of her complexion, and the lustrous brightness of her large dark eyes. Her golden hair was stylishly arranged; from the princely collection of jewels in the casket Mr. Pemberton had placed for her acceptance on the dressing-case, she had selected a diamond cross suspended from a black velvet band, and similar ornaments for her beautiful half-bared arms.

She bestowed a little nod of recognition on Fletcher as she entered.

"I will go down now, but I wish you to have a lunch in readiness for me when I come back. I shall not stay very long, for I am tired and prefer to be in my own rooms."

Her voice was sweet, but there was a superciliousness in it that made Fletcher tremble with consternation.

"Mr. Pemberton is very anxious to see you, Miss Elma. I am waiting to take you to him."

"You are! Well, in a moment, I shall be ready myself. Mr. Pemberton can afford to wait a few minutes longer, when he has waited so many years."

Fletcher's face paled.

"It will not do to keep him waiting. Miss—"

She turned imperiously toward him.

"Be so good as to understand I allow no dictation whatever. I fully understand my position here, and I also fully understand yours. More than once you have attempted to use an advisory manner toward me; once for all, I shall not permit it."

Miss Ogden looked despairingly at Fletcher, whose face slowly flushed under the girl's haughty manner.

"I am sorry, Mr. Fletcher," she began, deprecatingly, "but Elma is willful and imperious, and she will have her own way in spite of everything."

Elma laughed.

"Of course I will. Get me my fan, Miss Ogden, and then I'll go down. Only, I shall not have any more of your uncomplimentary remarks. Understand that."

Miss Ogden quietly handed her the fan, her calm face wearing a strange, inscrutable look as she gave Fletcher one rapid, curious glance.

Then the party went down-stairs, Fletcher leading, and Miss Ogden following the young girl.

Mr. Pemberton came forward to meet them, his grand, handsome face full of pale agitation, his keen blue eyes shining like stars as his glance fell on Elma.

Fletcher briefly presented Elma, and for the first time in Mr. Pemberton's knowledge of him, Fletcher's voice trembled painfully, and a look of swift, furtive fear gleamed in his eye.

"Sir, I have the honor and pleasure of presenting your niece, Miss Elma Pemberton, the daughter of your deceased sister."

Elma had halted, in a graceful, respectful attitude at the beginning of the address, her beautiful lips half-parted in a smile of glad, shy greeting, her lovely head slightly drooped—a picture of perfect maidenhood.

Miss Ogden, with her shrewd, intelligent eyes looking from Mr. Pemberton's kindling, critical, impassive face to Fletcher's agitated one, was herself a trifle paler than usual.

And so, for a moment, this quartette stood, a tableau which the hand of Fate had arranged.

Then, a smile deepened on Mr. Pemberton's face. He stepped up to Elma, took her hands in his, and kissed her on her fair brow.

"At first I felt strangely sure you were not my sister's child, for although you have the same dark eyes and fair hair, there is no look of resemblance between you. But, for your own sake, it would be hard not to love you. You are very beautiful, child—and, if after I have driven forever away this sudden, inexplicable suspicion that seized me the moment I saw you, I can—"

He paused abruptly, and then, all the sternness that was in his nature came surging into his imperious voice, as he turned and addressed Miss Ogden.

"Miss Ogden, I believe?" and he bowed, coldly. "I have one or two questions to ask you. Before the God who will one day be your judge, will you swear that this girl before you is the identical child intrusted to your care by my dying sister? Has she never been from under your care and supervision?"

His frosty blue eyes seemed to pierce her very soul as the solemn words left his lips. And even Fletcher, himself, paled as he heard them, and saw the agitation on her face.

But her reply came, earnest, convincing.

"I swear it, sir."

"And where are the proofs?"

She handed him a copy of the registered

birth of "Elma, daughter of Roswell Vernald Fairfax, and Genevieve Pemberton Fairfax, at San Delano, on Tuesday, Oct. 30th, 1858."

He read it with flashing eyes and compressed lips.

"That name is never to be whispered inside these walls," he said, pointing to the name of his sister's husband. "And you swear this is a genuine verbatim copy of the official register of this girl's birth?"

"I swear it."

"Very well," and he put the document in his memorandum-book. "I accept your testimony. I have every reason to think Fletcher is himself conscientiously satisfied. And,"—he allowed a moment of impressive silence to precede his announcement—"I acknowledge this young girl to be my sister's child, my lawful niece, and the heiress of my name and estates."

CHAPTER IX.

AT CECIL'S SECOND MARRIAGE.

THE few intervening days between the time when Cecil engaged her board and room temporarily at Mrs. Sayre's, and the day she had consented should be her wedding day—the early day to which Mr. Carriscourt had so impetuously and impassionedly persuaded her to agree, passed rapidly and pleasantly. Cecil found Mrs. Sayre to be a genial, cultivated lady, who at once proved an admirable counselor and friend, and who passed as much of her time as was desirably necessary with the lonely young girl.

Every one of the few days, there came a charming letter from her lover, and once he came to see her for an hour or so, and it was then, in that really first interview Cecil ever had had with him, that she saw what a grand, masterful man he was, what a tower of strength he would be to her, what an upright, high-principled man he was, on whom one could rely implicitly and emphatically, and who would be a friend better than all friends beside.

And yet—realizing all that, and knowing in her heart of hearts that she loved him—yet, Cecil could not bring herself to entirely recover from the scar of that cruel stroke of fate she had received in that other marriage, to be happy in Mr. Carriscourt's love, or to make him as absolutely happy as she knew she could make him by speaking just two or three passionate words which were always in her heart.

"It was such a silly fancy," she thought, one day—the day before the wedding-day. "As I look back now, I cannot see why I even thought I cared for poor Sydney Valence. I shiver when I think—if he had lived! How foolish and wicked I was—and yet, in such innocence and unconsciousness! And my punishment is the sick pain and fear I feel because of the secret with which I must go to Mr. Carriscourt, which must remain ever like an unseen yet unbridged chasm between us. And he is so noble, so proud, so honorable, that, although he is tender and gentle as a woman in his love to me, he would be terrible in his anger and contempt and scorn if he thought me unworthy, and he would, he would, for I am! I—the widow of a gambler, a forger, a suicide! Oh, Heaven! I dare not think, or I surely must retract my promise yet!"

She did not again allow herself to give way to such morbidity of reflection. She endeavored to decide positively and finally, that the secret was securely hidden, that no possible harm could ever come to Mr. Carriscourt through that one little hour of mistaken folly—that it was only herself who would ever suffer or be the wiser.

And with those final resolutions, Cecil's wedding-day dawned on her—as glorious a day as ever was blessed with genial winter sunshine, and a balmy westerly wind.

In the morning Mr. Carriscourt took an early train from Carris Court, in company with Mr. Oscar May, from Marchbrook, whom Cecil had expressed her willingness to have witness the marriage ceremony, although she knew she never could be on the old friendly terms again. The bitter pain of the merciless blow he had inflicted had settled down into a grief that with such a temperament as Cecil's would never be forgotten, although she forgave him and bore not the slightest malice or revenge. Yet—the scar would never be effaced.

What had passed between Cecil and Oscar May Mr. Carriscourt never exactly knew, and while he honored Cecil for keeping her own counsel and not exposing Mr. May, and while he was too proud to ask him what the trouble was, Mr. Carriscourt knew that something serious had occurred which never would be entirely righted.

Nevertheless, he desired to have Mr. May attend Cecil's marriage ceremony, and so the two gentlemen, and their portmanteaus, containing their wedding suits, arrived at the Fifth Avenue Hotel several hours before the time fixed for the ceremony, which, at Mrs. Sayre's warm invitation was to be solemnized in her parlors, at high noon.

At a little before twelve the coach containing the minister arrived, and almost immediately another in which were Mr. Carriscourt and Mr. May, who, after being shown to a dressing-room for any possible retouching of toilet, proceeded to the elegant parlors to await the bride. Cecil came down promptly, attended by Mrs. Sayre, and Mr. Carriscourt's heart fairly leaped to his eyes at sight of her, so pure, so dainty, so sweet, in all her royal dower of maiden modesty and grace, and wealth of beauty.

She was dressed very simply, for she had had no money to buy bridal finery, and would have stood up in her street suit rather than have asked Oscar May for money, or to have accepted the delicate, loving offer Mr. Carriscourt had made her. So, with the outlay of a mere trifle for white satin ribbon, and gloves, she had made a snowy swiss dress that was in her trunk answer admirably for her wedding-dress.

She wore no jewels, but from the magnificent bouquet Mr. Carriscourt had sent her that morning, she had selected the white and blush roses and buds, and wore them at her throat, in her lovely gleaming hair, at her side.

And a fairer bride never greeted groom at the altar than Cecil, as she went into the room, to be met near the door by Mr. Carriscourt, who pressed her hand fervently and gave her a look of passionate adoration and pride that thrilled through her.

Mr. May stepped up and extended his hand effusively, smiling and bowing as if their parting had been not the hard, cruel thing it had been, and Cecil quietly accepted his familiar greeting, returning it with a charmingly indifferent grace that delighted her lover.

Mr. Carriscourt then presented the minister, and then introduced Mrs. Sayre and Mr. May. And then—the bridal pair took their places, and the solemn, beautiful ceremony began—Mr. Carriscourt looking handsome, and satisfied, and proud as he stood there in all the glory of perfect manhood; Cecil, with drooped head, and face pale as her dress, listening to the solemn words, and thinking with a pain that was almost unendurable, of that other ceremony in the dusk of the day, in the dim little parlor of the Marchbrook vicarage; of that other marriage and the brief bridal tour, and—the awful tragedy, but for which, she would not have been standing at Clyde Carriscourt's side—this splendid man, with all his superb virtues, all his noble principles, all the rose-hued promises of the life into which he would take her.

And she remembered Sydney Valence, with his dark record, his impulsive sins, his bitter confession, and—the life from which he had saved her—for this!

The service went on, and the words were said, the vows made, the wedding-ring put on her cold, fair finger, and Cecil was Clyde Carriscourt's wife at last.

Then Mr. Carriscourt leaned toward her, as the last impressive words were said, and kissed her lips.

"Cecil, my wife!"

Congratulations followed, and Cecil accepted them in her shy, sweet, gracious way. Then Mrs. Sayre conducted them to the dining-room, where a superb wedding breakfast awaited them.

Afterward, Cecil was escorted to her room, to change her dress for her traveling dress, and at her especial, gentle request, she was left alone.

And the first thing she did was to lock her door, and go down on her knees at her bedside, in prayer that God would bless this marriage and make her worthy the love that was given her.

Then she went to her dressing-case, on which lay a little tin box, which she unlocked, taking therefrom a golden locket—a superb piece of workmanship, bearing her initial "C" in tiny sparkling diamonds.

"I wonder what I ought to do with it? I wonder if I had better keep it? It is all that Sydney ever gave me—and now it seems to me I should not keep it any longer."

She looked at it in grave thoughtfulness, then replaced it in the box, and relocked it, and put it in her trunk, locked and strapped the trunk.

"I cannot decide now; but this one thing I know, that, God helping me, when the time comes that I am assured I have secured such a

hold in Mr. Carriscourt's love and esteem that nothing can alter it—that then I will tell him."

And a sweet, peaceful smile was on her face as she made her change of toilet.

A moment afterward, a servant tapped on her door, to deliver a message.

"The gentleman down-stairs, Mr. May, please, sends his compliments, and would like to know if it would be agreeable for you to see him a few minutes before you and Mr. Carriscourt goes."

Cecil sent her answer back to Oscar May, waiting in the parlors below:

"I will see Mr. May, Catherine, in a few minutes. Tell him he may step up to my sitting-room, please."

"He wants to be my friend again, now that I am to be mistress of Carriscourt, and the nearest neighbor to Marchbrook," she thought, bitterly, all her pride revolting at the idea. Then her natural sweetness and gentleness overcame, and she thought:

"It is right that I should accept any overtures Oscar may make. I can afford to forgive him—I will forgive him, although it would be beyond human power to forget what he did in my hour of greatest need. Yes, I want to be good, and just—for Clyde's sake—to everybody."

Her lovely lips quivered, and there were suspicions of tears, that were not sorrowful tears, on her eyelashes.

She heard Mr. May's steps on the stairs, and she waited to open the door, little imagining all that was to come crushing down on her heart before she left the room again.

He came forward promptly, pleasantly, and took the chair Cecil indicated, one opposite her own.

"I thank you very much for this mark of your confidence and good feeling, Cecil," he began. "And as Carriscourt will be back with the coach to convey you to the depot in a very few minutes I shall say what I came to say, briefly. First of all, that I congratulate you sincerely on your new relations, and that, as far as I am concerned, any unpleasant memories shall be forever buried and the old-time delightful interchange of courtesy between Carris Court and Marchbrook shall be continued."

He waited for her reply, that came, in Cecil's low, sweet voice, with just a little accession of color to her face.

"I am sure it will be best as you say, Oscar, and I think—my husband—would indorse your words. His wishes are my law."

Mr. May bowed.

"Thanks. Then that is settled. And there is another point, which I think is due to you to mention. You remember, Cecil, when you learned that you were not Judge May's child, that beyond that bare fact you learned nothing. At that time I knew no more to tell you. Since then, from examinations of my father's papers, I have learned some facts relative to your birth and life antecedent to my mother's adoption of you, an infant, of two years of age."

Cecil had suddenly straightened in her seat, her face full of painful interest, her hands involuntarily clasped in a nervous grasp.

"Oh, Oscar! Can it be possible? Who were my mother and my father?"

Mr. May went on, lucidly:

"To make a long story short, Cecil, one day, while in Florence, sixteen years ago, or thereabouts, my mother came across a beautiful child, just old enough to run about and be entertaining in its baby ways—a lovely girl, my father's record says, with golden hair, like woven sunshine, and eyes blue as the Italian skies—an aristocratic, spirited, intelligent, affectionate baby of two years—you, Cecil, whose mother and father were both dead, leaving you in care of a young married woman who told my mother she had promised your dying mother to watch you and care for you as for her own little one who was about the same helpless age—and a bright, willful, saucy little girl. Briefly—my mother prevailed on the woman to give you to her. Legal documents were drawn up; and you became the adopted daughter of my parents, and although your mother never divulged her maiden name, and your own name escaped my father's memory, you see, Cecil, that you have no probable cause to blush for your birth, even though you never learn who your parents were. And this, which was carefully sealed in my father's safe, is my wedding-present to you—the only tangible link that binds you to your dead mother."

He handed her an exquisitely-painted por-

trait on ivory—a woman's face, fair and sweet, spirited and gracious, with eyes that awoke all the sleeping want of motherhood in Cecil's heart, as she reverently kissed it with her eager lips.

"My mother! My darling angel mother! Oscar, I can forgive and forget everything for the sake of this blessed treasure."

He smiled as he arose to go.

"That is all, Cecil. I hear a carriage at the door, which is for you—and there is only time to catch the train. Good-by, Cecil."

He shook her hand and left her alone. She went over to the window to look again at the angelic face that was already so dear to her; she kissed it warmly, whispering sweet words to it, and then, casually glanced up out of the window—to be suddenly frozen with horror—to be suddenly paralyzed with awful terror and fear! For there, opposite the window, looking straight in her eyes—God! she scarcely breathed in that one agonizing second before she fell fainting, to the floor, with a gasping whisper on her pallid lips.

"God be merciful! It is Sydney Valence! Sydney Valence is alive!"

CHAPTER X.

A FIGHT WITH FATE.

CECIL had just slidden quietly to the floor, with the horrified words on her lips that suddenly grew so blue and cold, as her husband rapped gently on the door, having passed Mr. May in the hall below and knowing from him that his wife was in readiness to depart.

He had hastened through the few necessary duties devolving upon him for the time, and now sought his bride, to look in her shy, sweet eyes the moment, to take her to his heart, to hear her whisper a name that would go thrilling along his veins.

No answer coming to his summons, he turned the handle of the door, which instantly yielded, and the first glance in the room showed him Cecil, lying prone on the floor, in a dead faint, so like death itself, that a cold chill of horror seized him.

He sprang forward to her, calling her name in agonized tenderness and dismay; then, he caught up a toilette bottle of ammonia and cologne that stood on the dressing-case, and bathed her rapidly and gently on her death-white face, and almost pulseless wrists, in doing which he saw the oval painting that still was clasped tightly in her rigid fingers.

"Can it be that it has anything to do with this?" he thought, as wisely and quietly he stepped back to the door and turned the key.

It is perhaps only natural that my little Cecil should faint like this, after the long strain and tension on her nervous system that the past few weeks have been. My beautiful, precious wife! my lamb, my treasure!"

He leaned over her, and kissed her tenderly on her mouth, that yielded no response to his swift, loving caress, but, by the faint warmth he detected on her flesh, and a slight fading of that ghastly, ashen pallor into a more life-like tinge, he was convinced that the swoon was not at all alarming, and that he had acted well and prudently in not alarming the house, and perhaps create an unpleasant gossip among the servants, who would be sure to think and say there was another lover in the case.

Mr. Carriscourt was still bending over her when she suddenly gave a gasping sigh, and stirred uneasily, and opened her eyes, that fairly appalled him with the look of terror and despair that was in them.

"My darling! You are better! You have been in a swoon, dear, but it is all over, now. Let me put you on the lounge until you feel stronger."

He lifted her as easily as though she had been a baby, and carried her to the little silken couch, placing the lace-ruffled pillow under her head, and the brilliant Afghan over her, as tenderly as a woman could have done.

"What was the matter, Cecil? Were you frightened at anything? Or, did Oscar communicate any unpleasant news?"

She saw the look of gathering displeasure in his eyes at the bare thought of any one's presuming to annoy her with anything unpleasant.

She dared not speak, even if she could have done so. It seemed to her that her tongue would never slip a word again; as if the sight of that dark, handsome face outside the window had changed all the world to her.

Mr. Carriscourt sat beside her, gently caressing her cold little hand, on which the wedding ring glistened so goldenly. He smiled reassuringly in her weary, wistful, horrified eyes,

and yet Cecil never said a word in all those terrible minutes in which she was trying to bring reason and judgment to her aid.

"You must tell me, dear, what this means," he said, directly, and there was a quiet command in his tones that Cecil knew she dared not disobey. "If you have been frightened, dear, somebody must be punished; if you are ill, I shall send for a physician, and defer our trip until you are able to bear it. Are you suffering, my darling?"

She nodded, dumbly, her lips quivering at sound of his tenderly solicitous voice.

Then she gathered all her strength and will by a desperate effort.

"It—it is nothing, Mr. Carriscourt. I will be better soon, I think. Only—if you would—please—leave me for a few moments, until—until—"

She looked wistfully at him, with that same pitiful, affrighted stare frozen into her blue eyes. He looked at her a moment, gravely.

"If you wish to be left, Cecil. Shall I send Mrs. Sayre, or a servant?"

She shrunk back into the lounge.

"Oh, no! I want to be alone—only a few minutes, please."

And, the instant the door closed behind him, she sprang wildly to her feet, trembling and reeling with every labored step she took toward the window.

She saw with one staring glance that the face had disappeared, and, the reaction setting in, she staggered back to the lounge, covering her white, despairing face with her cold hands.

"I saw him, I saw him, alive, and he saw me; he looked at me with just the same look he used to have! Oh, great God—what am I to do, what am I to do? Sydney Valence is not dead—not dead—and I am married to two husbands. Can't I die? Can't I die?"

Her fierce prayer was accompanied by sobs that shook the lounge she was on; and then, as if the fearfulness of the situation was unendurable, she sprang up again, and, turning the key of her door with trembling hands, walked over to the low marble mantle, and leaned her head upon it, pressing her hands upon the beating temples.

"I cannot think fast enough," she thought in a confused, desperate attempt at calmness. "I must instantly decide what to do—instantly. He is down there—I saw him, and he saw me, and knows I am here, knows, in all probability, or will very soon know, that I am again married—I—married, and both husbands living! Is it any wonder my senses seem leaving me? Is it any wonder I feel that it would be justifiable to take my life in my hands? Oh! I knew I ought not to have married Mr. Carriscourt; I felt all the time it was not right—and now—oh, into what a horrible mire of disgrace have I dragged him! The scandal—the sensation, the cruel gossip that will drive him mad with their stings! Oh, why did I not die in that long, long sickness when I was so willing to die? Why did I live for this, for this?"

She straightened herself in an agony of agitation, wringing her hands in utter despair.

"But I am not deciding, I am not deciding," she told herself, in a dazed, frozen way. "I must not waste another thought, or sentiment, or regret: it is unavailing. For Mr. Carriscourt's sake, what must I do? I cannot fly, I cannot get away from the house unknown or unseen, or God knows I would bury myself and my pitiful secret beyond all human finding. That is impossible. I cannot get away, leaving him in ignorance. Then—what?"

She drew her breath in long, hard inspirations, as if the effort were almost beyond her power.

"I must not live with him," she whispered, in a wild, piteous voice. "Before—before this, I thought it almost a sin to be his wife, but now—now—the crime—oh! God be merciful, and show me my way through this maze of horror!"

Poor Cecil! Poor, desperate, lonely, struggling child! All this cruel load of dread bearing on her shoulders, crushing her girlish heart, blighting her young life, and she so innocent, so entirely blameless, yet such a plaything of Fate!

She stood a second, ashen, agonized.

"I wonder," she said to herself, in a hoarse, hollow undertone, "I wonder—can I have been mistaken? Would not Sydney have sent to me, come to me? Would he not have claimed me? Can it be a mistake—can it be?"

It was the first line of reasoning of which her tortured brain had been capable; and the blessed hope grew as she more reasonably considered it.

"Yes," she said, slowly, "I think if Sydney

were alive he would never have left me in ignorance. Even if he lost all clew to my whereabouts, he surely, surely would have come now, or sent a message, or stayed where I could see him again. No—" and a ray of pitiful hope flashed faintly in her eyes—"it must have been either a strong resemblance that startled me, or a hallucination, perhaps not improbable under the circumstances."

It seemed as if a Merciful Father sent the inspiration to her poor tortured soul. For, surely, although her prayer was so fierce and wild and confused, He read the eager want for help and light and guidance.

"For Mr. Carriscourt's sake I am bound to avoid the cruel scandal my refusing to go with him as his wife would bring upon him. I dare not take the responsibility of ruining his name, his hopes, with one sudden blow. I must go with him as though nothing had happened, and while in the eyes of the world I will be his wife, yet, it must be between us as though no marriage ceremony had been said. I must be a wife to him in the emptiness of its sacred name only. And the kind Father who has directed me thus far will open still wider the path for me to tread."

Her face had lost nearly all its trace of agitation, although it was still pale when she touched the bell, and directed the servant to tell Mr. Carriscourt she was ready to start for the train.

He came immediately up to her, his face showing his anxiety on her account, and his eyes lighting with gladness as he saw the change on her countenance.

"You are better, my darling! You must tell me all about it when we are on our journey, Cecil. I am afraid I shall have to hurry you, dear, if we intend to take this train. Can I be of any assistance to you?"

She thanked him gently, saying that everything was in entire readiness.

Just then Mrs. Sayre came in the room, to offer her last services, and then, her veil over her sweet, pale face, Cecil walked down to the carriage in waiting, and started off on her wedding-trip.

Her second wedding-tour; and even as her first had ended in a tragedy, this had begun with a complication of pitiful misery that sent darkest forebodings over her. And—how would it end?

CHAPTER XI.

DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND.

AN hour had passed since Mr. Pemberton had dismissed Elma upon Miss Ogden's request that she might be allowed to seek rest and refreshment in her own room. Mr. Pemberton had retired to his library and was in consultation with one of his men of business. The servants were gathered in a gossiping conclave in the house-keeper's sitting-room, eagerly discussing the manner and appearance and prospects of the heiress—so that the great, grand house was unusually deserted when Cuthbert Pemberton let himself in at the front entrance, and walked through the brilliantly lighted room.

"Miss Pemberton has arrived, beyond a doubt," he thought, "and I have timed my purposely late arrival well. She has had the all-important interview with the old gentleman, and retired in state. I wonder what impression she made on him? I wonder what impression she will make on me? I rather think a not very forcible one—especially just at present, for I am haunted by that glorious face at the window; it makes my veins tingle to think of her. To look in her eyes must be heaven—but she never has raised her lovely-lashed lids for me, yet."

His handsome, sinister face lighted at thought of Cecil May.

"But—now to the task of winning this fortunate young creature who has stepped in between me and the inheritance I have always looked forward to with double interest since Sydney mortally offended the old gentleman, and was cut adrift in a moment of fury and passion. Well—perhaps it was as well; certainly it is better for me that he was detected, while I, the master-brain, escaped. Poor Syd! Wonder what became of him? It's a deuced long while since I've heard of him."

He had been standing in front of the cheery, glowing grate-fire—steam heat and furnaces being innovations on comfort and health and artistic homeness that Mr. Pemberton would not tolerate—looking into the bed of coals that was like living rubies, when he heard the *frou-frou* of a woman's trained silken skirts on the grand stair-case, and the dainty fall of feet that could belong—in that house—to no one but Elma Pemberton.

He turned instantly around, with a look of expectant eagerness in his eyes, and went swiftly toward her, taking in all her grace and style and independence at one rapid glance, during which his face lighted up, and his handsome dark eyes smiled satisfiedly.

It was indeed Elma, who, in one of her independent impulses, had come down-stairs again after she had partaken of the delicious lunch Fletcher had ordered up to her room. She had not changed her dress, and had simply gone down again, knowing, from what Fletcher said, that Mr. Pemberton was busily engaged in the library, and therefore supposing the parlor would be unoccupied, for the express purpose of looking critically and exultingly about her, to revel in anticipation of all this fairy fortune that had come to her, to gloat over the prospect of possessions that were promised her.

She had gone half-way across the room before being aware of Cuthbert Pemberton's presence, and, upon seeing him, halted and bowed slightly, her black eyes showing not the faintest sign of embarrassment at this sudden *rencontre* with a stranger.

While he, whom nothing could have embarrassed or confused, advanced, smiling and courteous.

"My cousin Elma, I am sure! If it is not tardy, allow me to welcome you to your new home, and hope you will be as happy in it, and among us as we—as I—am delighted to have you with us."

He spoke in his soft, mellow voice that held a peculiar, well-bred deliberateness, especially fascinating to women, and that did not fail to charm this cool, critical girl, who smiled and inclined her head graciously and extended her hand to his own.

"I am very glad to see you, cousin; of course you are Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton, of whom I have heard so much, and—so favorably."

She parted her red lips in a bewitching little smile, and Cuthbert's fingers closed over her hand in an impulsive, caressing pressure.

"I hope the impression you may have of me will corroborate Fletcher's friendly report, cousin Elma. I sincerely wish we may become very dear friends."

"There's not the least doubt of it, on my part," she said, lightly, disengaging her hand, and moving across the room to a specially luxurious-looking divan. "Come, talk to me, and tell me all about everything."

He had watched her graceful, gliding walk across the room, his sharp, shrewd eyes full of keenest interest; when she seated herself he suddenly resumed his *dévo*té, cavalier attention, and followed her, taking up his position beside the low mantle-piece, and leaning his elbow upon it, and watching her as one watches a face, or manner, for the temperament, the character beneath.

"I would much rather talk about yourself, cousin Elma. Let me tell you how beautiful you are, what a genuine sensation you are bound to make in society, and how extremely fortunate I consider myself to have the honor and pleasure of introducing you. Only"—and he leaned nearer her and his voice deepened into a persuasive tone—"you must promise me not to be too fascinating to the other fellows."

Elma laughed—a melodious little laugh that showed her dimples, and the pretty curves of her mouth, and her pearly-white teeth.

"Do you really mean that? Of course, I expect to make a sensation! Why shouldn't I? The niece and heiress of Mr. Griffith Pemberton ought to make a sensation. Besides, I am young, and new to New York society, and—yes, I might just as well be frank about it—I know I am quite pretty, and I am resolved to have a glorious time."

A look of new interest deepened in Cuthbert's eager eyes.

"She is just what my first impression told me," he was thinking, while he listened to her. "She is vain as a peacock, and elated with her good fortune. She does not possess a remarkable depth of character, and, I am equally sure, her principles are not what one would suppose the old gentleman's sister's child would be. I take her to be shallow and stubborn, willful and bold, and—not quite the well-bred lady Fletcher represented her. All the same—she shall marry me."

"There is one thing," Elma resumed, after a second of silence, and she leaned back against the shining lemon-satin chair-back, twisting her diamond cross slowly, "and that is—Mr. Pemberton, (uncle Griffith I suppose I shall call him hereafter), between you and I, cousin Cuthbert, I'm not going to like him. He is too severe and

stern and aristocratic for me, and he must know from the very first that I am not a baby in his hands. I have a will and a mind of my own, and I intend using them to my own satisfaction. And besides—"

She hesitated, looking a little distrustfully at him.

"I suppose what I say to you is confidential? It certainly should be, cousin Cuthbert."

"It is sacred. You may class me first on your list of friends—a friend who will devote himself to you and your interests and your happiness."

She rewarded him with a coquettish little glance and a smile.

"All right, then; I will tell you one reason why I particularly dislike uncle Griffith: because he actually doubted whether or not I was his heiress—actually insisted upon Miss Ogden's swearing that I was his sister's child! As if I were some fraud whom they were attempting to palm off on him!"

A curious little light glittered a moment in Cuthbert Pemberton's dark eye.

"I do not wonder the suspicion distressed you. But you will forgive it, I am sure, when you see how we shall make your life a bright rose-colored dream of happiness."

She had turned her head toward the glowing fire and sat gazing meditatively at it, and Cuthbert stood watching her, his thoughts running briskly on:

"It is strange that I momentarily entertained the same suspicion," he mused, with intense, though quiet interest. "Somehow, I had always imagined this cousin of mine would be a dainty, pure, high-bred creature, as different from this girl as a star from a gas-jet. Elma is undeniably pretty—yes, unquestionably handsome and brilliant, but there is a *prononcé* way with her, a lack of maidenly reserve, that grates on one, involuntarily—that reminds one of a paste gem. And yet, it is absurd in the extreme to entertain the suspicion, for the proof is indubitable. She is undoubtedly my cousin, with a strain of some foreign blood marring the purity of the Pemberton characteristics. But, I'd give my soul if she was like that pure-faced, angelic creature I cannot forget, night or day."

Elma abruptly scattered his roaming reverie.

"And I perfectly hate that man Fletcher. I never saw him in all my life until a few weeks ago, but the way he attempted to establish a footing of actual friendly familiarity was simply disgusting. Miss Ogden took to him at once—indeed, I should have thought they were old friends, long separated."

Cuthbert listened, attentively.

"Miss Ogden? You have mentioned her twice, cousin Elma. She is your companion, I understand."

"Oh, yes—I suppose that is what she calls herself. She is good enough when she wants to be, but of course she doesn't presume to dictate to me. She is the nurse to whom mamma left me in charge when she died."

Her flippant words jarred on his senses—bold, designing man that he was.

"I admire your spirit, cousin Elma. I foresee that you and I will become fast friends. And now, I will presume to give you just one word of counsel. May I?"

He smiled persuasively in her curious, handsome eyes.

"Oh, of course, you may give me all the advice you choose—but you know I may not follow it, cousin Cuthbert!"

"I hope you will," he said, with a grave eagerness in his tone that had precisely the effect he intended it should have—that of riveting the girl's attention, and pleasing her desire for flattery. "I hope you will," he said, "for your own sake—for my sake, cousin Elma, for I am sure you could succeed in making me very unhappy if you chose. It is this—one of Mr. Pemberton's resolutions in regard to you, is, that you entertain no lover, no offer of marriage, such as you will be sure to have, without his sanction."

She smiled, and flushed under his bold, handsome eyes.

"What nonsense! Come, cousin Cuthbert, take me and show me some of the beauties of my new home."

An hour or more was spent in looking through the conservatories, the picture-gallery, the billiard-room, music-room, and then Elma bade him good-night.

"He certainly is the very handsomest gentleman I ever saw in my life. He means that it would be best for us to marry and keep the money in the family—as if it took any discernment to understand that. He is handsome.

well-bred, aristocratic and elegant, and I think I shall like him amazingly well. And if it wasn't for my promise to Thorsby—poor Thorsby! he was heart-broken when I left him—I believe I'd win my handsome cousin at my own good pleasure. I wonder what they'd all say if they knew about Thorsby and I?"

And then Elma allowed Miss Ogden and the maid to prepare her toilet for the night.

CHAPTER XII.

A VILLAIN'S GOOD LUCK.

Two days had passed since Mr. Griffith Pemberton and his promising nephew had driven past Mrs. Sayre's boarding-house to catch the coveted glance of Cecil May's bewitchingly lovely face; two days since Elma Pemberton had arrived at her uncle's Fifth avenue mansion, and, notwithstanding the exceedingly good terms on which the two cousins had already established themselves, it was impossible for Cuthbert Pemberton to divest his mind and imagination of the fair face which perpetually haunted him.

Two or three times daily he had made it his business to drive or walk past the windows of Cecil's room, but never had it been his good fortune to catch a glance from her eye.

It was the evening of the second day of Elma's arrival at her new home—the night before Cecil's marriage—and after she and Cuthbert had given some very fair specimens of parlor music, that gentleman had, with apparent reluctance, torn himself away from her society—in reality, glad to go, for her vivacity and *prononcé* style were not at all in accordance with his critical taste. So he had pleaded a pressing, unfortunate prior engagement, much to Elma's boldly-expressed dissatisfaction, and, betaken himself, with a few choice cigars, to a quiet little room on the upper floor of the house where he was quite sure of finding Fletcher—and of whom he wanted to ask a special favor.

He found Fletcher, enjoying his after-dinner cigar with as much ease and freedom as though he were himself lord of the manor. He received a quiet welcome, and took a big lounging-chair near the open fire, and the two men prepared for a confidential talk, which, for a wonderful rarity was opened by Fletcher.

"I have been waiting several days for an opportunity of seeing you, Mr. Cuthbert, and I am especially glad you took the notion to come up to my den to-night. I accidentally stumbled upon news of your brother Sydney a short time ago, and I supposed you would want to hear it."

"The poor devil! Oh, yes, of course—tell me what you know, Fletcher. Only I hope he isn't after money again from you."

Because Cuthbert himself had come to Fletcher for a very similar purpose.

"No," Fletcher answered, gravely. "Sydney will not trouble any one for more money or anything else again. He has been dead for months."

Not the slightest suspicion of dismay or regret or emotion showed itself on Cuthbert's face. He knocked the little cap of ashes off his cigar, into a convenient ash-receiver, with as little concern, and as accurate a touch, as though Fletcher had remarked on the chilliness of the May evening.

"Dead, is he? Well, I am not sure it's the worst thing that could have happened to him. He must have lived in constant fear of the detection of his crime, poor, unfortunate, miserable fool. Dead! How do you know, Fletcher?"

"It was in the papers at the time, I have since learned, and by looking at a *Herald* of the given date, I found a brief account of a momentary encounter, at early daybreak, near the Grand Central depot, between a young man, on whose person were cards bearing the name of 'Sydney Valence,'—your brother's first and middle names, from which he dropped the family name for reasons that are obvious—and a sudden act of suicide on his part. That is all the paper says. There was very little attention paid to it. The coroner granting a permit for burial on the attest of several who swore his death was suicidal, and no one to blame but himself. This was in December, on the 17th."

"And now it's May the 28th. Over five months ago. And you never heard of it until recently?"

"Until a week ago, when, having occasion to require the services of a couple of extra policemen to guard the funds in transit from the bank to the manufactory, the conversation, during the two hours' drive with the officers on the inside the coach with me, took a turn in which he rehearsed this accident on his beat, last winter, and which interested him in consequence of the

romance connected with it—for there was a woman in the case."

Cuthbert smiled.

"I never suspected Syd of that style of mischief," he said, rather contemptuously.

"She was with him, and they had come in on the down-train. Your brother had left her in the ladies' room, presumably to call a carriage, and the scrimmage occurred outside. It seems one of the party said something to the effect that 'it would all come out, now,' whereupon, like a flash, Sydney put his revolver to his temple, fired, and fell dead."

Cuthbert looked thoughtfully into the dying embers.

"Syd wasn't a coward, either. He had some good reason for shooting himself. Well—what else? What about the girl?"

"Larkins is of the opinion that she was his wife. She was a thoroughbred lady in manner, appearance, dress and voice, and, Larkins says, the most beautiful girl he ever saw in his life. She was a perfect blonde—with a bewitching face, as fair as a lily, and lovely blue eyes, and bright, waving gold-colored hair. She was slender and graceful."

Fletcher had pictured the girl at the window, and Cuthbert's heart gave an involuntary throb, although with the next breath he realized the absurdity of the vague thought he had entertained.

"There are hundreds of beautiful blondes in this city," he thought, "and men's estimates

"When Larkins found her still waiting in the ladies' room, some little time after, and asked her if she was looking for Sydney, and told her what had happened, she fainted, and the swoon becoming dangerously prolonged, he had her sent in an ambulance to the hospital, where she remained ill with brain fever for weeks and weeks."

"Did she divulge nothing during her delirium? If that police-officer was so interested, he should have made all possible inquiries."

"He did, he says," Fletcher returned, quietly.

"Among the few words they could understand during her unintelligible fever raving, were the names 'Sydney' and 'Cecil' and 'May,' and the theory is that the latter was her own name, and Cecil perhaps another lover, or a brother."

"May!" How strange it was that the name of "May" would so completely suit the fair girl at the window, and, despite himself, Cuthbert Pemberton began to feel an eager interest in this romance of his dead brother.

"Well—when she recovered, what?"

"When she recovered, she left the hospital; that was less than a week ago, and Larkins confessed to being actually grieved at having completely lost all trace of her."

Cuthbert sneered.

"Larkins is a superannuated old fossil! What the deuce has a pretty girl to do with him?"

"Until to-day," Fletcher went on, gravely ignoring the impetuous interruption. "And to-day, while he was going through Madison avenue, near 23d street, he glanced up at a window of Mrs. Sayre's private boarding-house, to look at some lovely plants blooming on the balcony, and saw the young girl again."

Cuthbert sprang excitedly from his chair, his dark eyes flashing eagerly.

"At Mrs. Sayre's! The exquisite girl with the fair pure face and the hair like liquid sunshine! By the great Olympus, Fletcher, if it isn't the most astonishing thing I ever heard of! Why, she's the very girl I've been raving about; that I made the old gentleman drive past to see—the most dainty, gloriously beautiful creature I ever saw!"

A look of swift displeasure crossed Fletcher's face at Cuthbert's impetuosity.

"Excepting your lovely cousin, Mr. Cuthbert. Don't forget your intentions regarding her."

Cuthbert laughed shortly.

"You're suspiciously anxious to have me marry her, Fletcher! One would almost think there was policy at bottom."

For one swift second, Fletcher's eyes dropped. The next, he looked straight in the young fellow's eyes.

"Yes. I'll admit there is policy at bottom. I don't want to see the property leave the family."

Cuthbert flung his half-smoked cigar in the cuspidore, and began a restless promenade of the room.

"I wonder who the deuce she is? Do you really suppose they were married, Fletcher? I can't understand how such an angel could fancy Syd, but then—"

Fletcher waited a moment for him to con-

tinue, then took up the thread himself, with a patient indifference that was like gall and wormwood to the other:

"They were married—that I happen to know, partly from a letter your brother wrote me last winter, in which he describes this young girl, saying he hoped to marry her, telling me of his faith and trust that she would effectually reclaim him. The letter, asking for funds, I laid before your uncle and received my orders to pay no attention to it."

Cuthbert listened, almost fiercely.

"What was the postmark?"

"Marchbrook, a village up the Hudson."

"Marchbrook! Marchbrook! The name sounds somewhat familiar. I remember, Carris Court is near there, and there is another estate belonging to the May family, after which the village is named. By Jove, Fletcher! There's the name for you—that girl is a May!"

"Yes. I have learned that during these last two days, sir. I wrote to Marchbrook to learn if there had been a marriage solemnized there between a Sydney Valence, or a Sydney Pemberton, and a young girl whom I described. And the answer came—yes. By the rector of the parish, on Dec. 16th, and the names of the parties were Sydney Valence and Cecil May."

"Great Jupiter, what a brain you possess, Fletcher! I don't know whether you are most to be admired or dreaded."

Fletcher smiled slightly.

"There is but one link now in this curious chain to bring us to the present time, and while I have been working at the furthest end, Larkins has made another discovery here. Miss May—or properly speaking Mrs. Sydney Valence—is staying temporarily at Mrs. Sayre's, and is to be married to-morrow noon to a Mr. Clyde Carriscourt."

Cuthbert uttered a curse between his lips. His forehead corrugated into a frown, and he turned sharply away from the episode of Fletcher's revelation.

"Fletcher! My brother's widow! My beautiful sister-in-law! That glorious girl whom of all the world I could love as I could love no other living creature! What a curious Fate! And to marry Carriscourt of all men—that haughty, high-bred aristocrat who, as she goes by the name of Miss Cecil May at the boarding-house, can know nothing of that former marriage! And from what I know of Carriscourt he wouldn't marry her if he suspected his bride was what we know she is."

His face slowly took an expression of exultant malignity as his thoughts ran on:

"Married, to Carriscourt, who knows me for—well, perhaps pretty nearly what I'm worth! Consequently,—and the exultant look in his eyes deepened into an evil baseness—"I shall change my tactics somewhat. I still propose to cultivate the fair Cecil's acquaintance, but, hardly as a lover. If my theory, that has come like an inspiration, is correct, Carriscourt's lovely bride has deceived him, and keeps her own counsel—depending, of course, upon her belief that her first husband is dead. Now—Carriscourt is a rich man, and able to supply his wife with a magnificent allowance. I am in perpetual need of the same desirable medicine. I am a counterpart of my dead brother—why not trade on that fact, and—raise the needful by showing myself to my charming sister-in-law, and then purchase her secret on my own terms?"

His face was alight with satanic triumph as he mentally resolved to pursue that bent of thought evolved from his diabolical brain.

The very next day—the day of Cecil's second marriage, he put his plan into operation, with the success that attends Satan's own.

"She saw me, she recognized me!" he told himself, exultantly, as he went away from opposite Mrs. Sayre's house, and from the curtained window of his carriage watched the wedding coach leave the door. "She is playing straight into my hands! I saw the look of fear and horror in her blue eyes when she saw me, and I have fully convinced her that her first husband is yet alive! I saw her reel and suddenly drop—of course in a swoon. Evidently she has never heard of Syd's twin-brother, and she never need. Enjoy your wedding tour as well as you can, fair Cecil—for, after you arrive home—"

And his dark face glowed with the merciless wickedness of his heart, as he leaned back against the cushions of the carriage.

CHAPTER XIII.

SO NEAR, AND YET SO FAR.

THE short drive to the dépôt was passed in al-

most perfect silence by Cecil, who sat back against the cushions with her veil closely concealing the expression of her face.

Mr. Carriscourt, with a delicacy and thoughtfulness so characteristic of him, did not press her to converse, even on the most trivial subjects, but chatted pleasantly and freely on passing topics that required but few answers from her.

Upon the train, bound to Niagara, where they were to make their first stop, Mr. Carriscourt secured an entire compartment in a palace car, where he left undone no effort that could conduce to Cecil's comfort. He supplied her with books, and the daily papers, and the magazines which the train-boy peddled. He arranged her a cosy seat with head-rest and footstool in the shaded corner, and then seated himself opposite, and looked at her while she read, her lovely face bearing traces of her recent struggle with fate.

After a while, he softly laid his hand on the open magazine she was examining, and Cecil looked up to meet his tender, passionate eyes.

"You have not yet said one word to me, my darling, beyond a few syllables of everyday conversation. I am yearning to hear you speak as my precious wife should speak to me. I want to tell you how dearly I love you, and how it is henceforth the business of my life to make you happy. My darling, lay down your book and let me look in your sweet eyes."

His grand, noble face was full of affectionate yearning over her, and Cecil gave a little involuntary gasp of pain, and her face whitened with agitation as she tremblingly lifted her veil—revealing all the pitiful misery, all the sharp distress which she could not longer restrain from his loving espionage.

He straightened instantly into eager attention of attitude, his face betraying his astonishment at sight of hers.

"Cecil! What have you been doing with yourself? What does this mean?"

His voice was pained and grave, and it made her poor crushed heart sink, and her mouth quiver with distress.

Then she suddenly covered her cold, nerveless hands over her face, and he saw the desperate effort all over her slender frame, to keep from yielding to the storm of passionate tears that threatened to overwhelm her.

She dared not speak; she felt she had no control over her voice; and so he waited vainly a moment for her answer, before he spoke again.

"My darling, tell me what is the matter with you? Do you feel ill again? Do you feel the faintness you had this noon coming again? Speak, Cecil; you alarm me."

She shook her head, in a pitiful little dumb dissent, and reached out her hand to detain him as he sprang from his seat.

"No—no," she whispered, with an effort. "I am not sick; do not be so terrified, Mr. Carriscourt. Wait—a minute." Her voice, constrained though it was, reassured him, and he sat down again, watching her closely, his face full of tenderest solicitude and jealous alarm.

Cecil leaned her head back against the cushions again, in a weary, dejected attitude that sent a vague thrill of concern through him.

What could it mean? What was it that ailed Cecil, on this her wedding-day? Just after the ceremony she had fainted, and now, what did this pained, blanched face, with its pallid, quivering lips, its agonized eyes, mean?

What could it portend? He asked himself the question only once, with a thrill of dismay, and then, banished it from his mind as unworthy attention.

"It can mean but one thing," he assured himself, positively. "Cecil is in a state of nervous depression, and that comes from physical weakness. She has not fully recovered from the illness she tells me she endured; she is excited unduly, as is natural under the circumstances, and this is the result. My poor little girl. What care I shall take of her, now that she has given herself to me."

Those were his thoughts, as he rapidly unlocked Cecil's traveling satchel and found the little crystal and gold smelling bottle he had been told by Mrs. Sayre was there, for any possible emergency. He removed the tiny stopper and held it for her to scent, and then chafed her cold hands tenderly and wrapped her shawl about her, for, despite the loveliness and warmth of the May afternoon, Cecil was chilly with nervousness.

And she accepted his delicate, womanly attentions, with an increasing outward calmness that effectually reassured him, while within the woe was keener than ever because of this new proof of his goodness and tenderness.

For half an hour or more she lay with her head against the cushions, her white eyelids drooped, scarcely daring to move, lest the slight control she had secured over herself should give way again.

Then, as the appalling uncertainty, the heart-sickening realization of her position came freshly over her, Cecil uttered a little sighing moan she vainly tried to stifle.

Mr. Carriscourt's face shadowed again, not with alarm, this time, but with a slow, sorrowing gravity of pain.

"Cecil, you must tell me what this means. It is not physical distress you are suffering; of that I am convinced. Whatever the trouble is, share it with me, dear. I am correct, am I not, that your grief is mental?"

She whispered "yes," in a low, almost inaudible murmur.

"And I may help you bear it, dearest?"

She shook her head, and he noticed the pitiful, restless motion of her hands. His eyes darkened with distress.

"I think I already know the cause of your distress, Cecil. I will spare you the evident pain of telling me that—you regret having given yourself to me, to be my wife." He commanded his voice perfectly, but there was an anguish in the brief words that cut Cecil to the very soul.

And yet—he had spared her the telling!

She looked at him, a touching, appealing expression in her sad blue eyes.

"It has been a mistake, Mr. Carriscourt. I—did not know—until—"

The desperate confession was actually trembling on her lips—the confession which would at once have corrected all the mistaken ideas that were doomed to cause them both such suffering in the coming days.

But—she hesitated, in fear and dismay, and Mr. Carriscourt, entirely misconstruing the broken sentence, took it up and finished it according to his own impression.

"I see," he said, with a gentle, pitying gravity that nobly concealed the cruel anguish with which each of her halting words had hurt him; "my poor child, I perfectly understand it all now. I over-persuaded you, thinking such love as I could give you, could not fail in compelling love in return, and it was not until the irrevocable words were said, not until you actually realized you were married to me, that you discovered what a pitiful mistake you had made."

She dared not lift her eyes to his, or she would have seen a deeper sorrow and unspoken gravity of suffering there than she would have thought possible. As it was, every one of his pityingly, infinitely tender words, each one of which was brimming with heart-sick disappointment, stabbed her to the soul, that she thus had to wound such a spirit as this. She did not answer, but sat gazing wistfully through the window.

"My poor little girl," he went on, "I do not wonder at your distress. It must be a terrible situation for a woman to find herself in—only you told me, you assured me, Cecil," and his voice thrilled eagerly, "that you cared for no other man."

"I do not—oh, indeed I do not!" she whispered, eagerly as he had put the words.

"Still you feel you have done that which causes you regret in marrying me, Cecil. Cecil!" and she felt the mighty throb in his low, intense tones, "do you wish to be free again? Do you wish me to give you your freedom?"

A little piteous cry came from her lips, more eloquent than any words Cecil could have spoken. Mr. Carriscourt was astonished. What was the mystery of Cecil's conduct? He put the question to her plainly.

"Cecil, what is the meaning of all this!—for that you have some reason for this unaccountable conduct is positive. My dear little girl, tell me all about it—no matter how hard you may hit me."

She turned impetuously toward him the tears rushing to her eyes.

"I cannot, Mr. Carriscourt, I cannot! I feel so strangely—I am so unworthy of such perfect love as you give me—I do not dare accept it—it was all so sudden—so—so unexpected—and I must have more time to—to make up my mind—to—to decide—oh, Mr. Carriscourt, I dare not speak of it—please wait a little while!"

She was incoherent, and she knew she must be. He listened patiently, trying to put her pitiful little protest into a coherent story.

"You puzzle me, Cecil, I will admit that much. You told me frankly you feared you did not love me well enough to marry me, and, dear, I agreed to accept the friendly regard you confessed you entertained for me.

in the sweet, sure hope that the love I desired would come. Now—you tell me you repent our marriage even on those perfectly understood terms, Cecil! Something has occurred to bring about this state of affairs. You fainted just after the ceremony. Had that sudden illness anything to do with the cause of this condition of affairs?"

He was looking straight in her eyes, commanding her attention by his earnest, resolute manner. She shrunk away from him in a panic of fear.

"I—cannot tell you."

"You cannot tell me?"

She nodded dumbly.

"Then, it is apparent that something has happened of which I am not to be the confidant. That must be just as you please, Cecil, for I shall not demand your confidence. Then—what remains to be done? You are my wife, and I cannot give you your freedom. The scandal would be more than I could well endure. What shall I do, Cecil? You cannot leave me—I would not let you go out all alone in the world again, even if you wished."

His voice suddenly changed from its quiet sternness into tender compassion.

"I am not deserving of such devotion," she said, brokenly. "Oh, Mr. Carriscourt, what must I say? If—if—I might go with you—just the same—to everybody—but ourselves."

She could not utter the words that were the death-warrant to Clyde Carriscourt's happiness. And he, with his grand face pale and grave, his eyes showing the keen distress he was experiencing, supplied the words himself.

"I understand," he said, gently. "The world must never know of this worm in the bud of our life. To the world, society and our friends we owe the duty of concealing the misfortune that has fallen upon us; to them you will be what you will not be to me—my wife. I understand, Cecil; it shall be—" and he suddenly hesitated, looking at her with all his great love, all his great sorrow in his eyes, and drawing a long breath, with stern, compressed lips—"it shall be as you suggest—until the time comes when you can come to me and say you are ready to be my wife in truth as well as name. Till then, Cecil, look upon me as your best, nearest earthly friend, your devoted brother."

The tears dropped slowly off Cecil's lashes.

"If I could only tell you!" she burst forth, in a little agonized impulse, then adding, drearily and hopelessly, "but I cannot, I cannot! Something has happened, but it is only I who should carry the secret. It is only I who ought to suffer, and to my dying day I shall suffer! But I cannot tell you!"

The train swept on, and this fated pair sat there, busy with their distressful thoughts, a painful silence fallen between them, broken by Carriscourt:

"It seems advisable for us to alter our plans somewhat, Cecil. I think it preferable that, instead of going to Niagara and Montreal, as we intended, we go directly home to Carris Court, which we will reach in twenty minutes or so."

She gave him a grateful little smile.

"It would be best."

And so, they began the new life.

CHAPTER XIV

BEGINNING THE NEW LIFE.

CARRIS COURT, although not in the gala attire of glad welcome in which it would have been had the master and his bride returned at the appointed time, was still looking as it always did, magnificent and grand, and as the carriage for which Mr. Carriscourt had telegraphed, at the station ahead, rolled up through the wide-open gates, and into the spacious grounds, it was a beautiful sight to see.

The May afternoon was at its zenith, and a flood of sunshine lay on the well-trimmed lawn, where the grass was vivid as emeralds. The stately old trees were just bursting into leafage, and swayed their branches in the light westerly breeze. Back of the mansion, clouds of snowy and roseate blossoms were on the fruit trees of the immense orchards for which Carris Court was famous, while reaching far and wide were the superbly cultivated acres of vegetable garden, pineries, nurseries, grapevines.

It was a fair home, at sight of which Cecil's heart gave a thrilling throb of delight, despite the heaviness of her spirits, and her husband saw the interested look she gave everything as the carriage rolled smoothly along the beautiful wide drive, on either side of which were scores of wide-spreading trees which would afford an avenue of exquisite coolness and shade in the sultry summer weather. On one side was the

laket, its blue bosom rippling and shining under the sunshine; on the other a gently descending slope, green and velvety, terminating in a deer park, where the graceful creatures were lazily browsing. Through glimpses in the budding shrubbery and from turns in the road, Cecil caught sight of lovely summer-houses, stately fountains, beautiful rustic seats in spots that commanded vistas, and an airy elevated Chinese pagoda, that served for a music stand upon occasions of festivity.

It was all perfect. It was a home upon which cultivated taste and unlimited means had left their impressions everywhere—a home to which a bride should have been so proud, so pleased to come.

And, despite the trouble that had fallen upon them, Cecil could not keep the sparkle of proud delight from shining in her blue eyes.

"It is more beautiful than I dreamed anything earthly could be," she said, in a little burst of admiration that went very far toward rallying Mr. Carriscourt's depressed spirits.

"It is all yours, Cecil. If devotion and attention to your welfare can make you happy here, you shall be so."

A few minutes' longer ride brought them to the grand entrance to Carris Court, and with the sunshine glittering on the dozens of plate-glass windows, the gay show of striped awnings and the rich luster of silken curtains inside, the exquisite symmetry of the huge building with its bay and oriel windows, its towers, and chimneys, its piazzas and marble-paved courts, Cecil thought that it was a veritable palace transported from fairyland.

The promise of Carris Court as given from the outside was more than fulfilled within. The rooms were numerous, spacious and luxuriously fitted up. There were all the appliances of art and wealth, and clinging to everything was that air of refinement and naturalness and elegance that is so often missing in decorations and adornments.

Mr. Carriscourt's unexpected arrival had found everything just as a well-regulated household should be found, and in the time that intervened between the receipt of the telegram ordering the carriage to the depot, and the arrival of the bridal pair, Mrs. Siddons, the housekeeper, had arranged an elegant lunch.

As the carriage drove up to the door, Mrs. Siddons and Blake, the butler, were in respectful readiness to receive their young mistress, and Rollins, the porter, flung the massive door open with a royal obeisance to welcome her.

In the magnificent hall—a spacious square apartment, opened to the dome of Carris Court, through which the sunshine fell through tinted glass that made brilliant shadows on the tessellated marble floor—Mr. Carriscourt stopped a moment to introduce Cecil to Mrs. Siddons and Blake and to say a pleasant word to them.

Then, when she had received their respectful courtesies and stately words of welcome and congratulation, young Mrs. Carriscourt was conducted by her husband into a delightful little reception-room opening from the main hall—a gem of a room, but whose beauties seemed lost on Cecil, who sunk wearily in the nearest chair.

"You are tired, Cecil; you had better retire to your own room, and seek rest and quiet. If you prefer, I will ring for Mrs. Siddons to show you your apartments, but as it is a pleasure to which I had been looking very eagerly forward, I would like to be permitted to show you there myself."

Her pale cheeks flushed slightly under his eyes, that were full of cold bitterness of disappointment, but only for one brief second; then he held out his hand, and led her through the grand, majestic hall again, chatting pleasantly, and pointing out specially interesting or beautiful objects.

He led the way up the grand staircase, that besides being amply wide for three or four persons to comfortably walk abreast, afforded equally ample accommodation at both ends of each stair for the rare potted palms and fern that thus double lined the entire flight, while the center of the stairs was covered with mossy velvet carpet.

Cecil walked silently beside him, seeing all the luxury and beauty to which he had brought her, and asking herself, over and over, why it was that she could not have been left alone by a merciless Fate, and have spent her contented, quiet life in this fairy home her lover's love had given her.

"This suit is to be devoted entirely to your private use, Cecil," he said, opening a door at the end of a long wing on the western side of the building. "Of course I had intended—dif-

ferently, but you will find it very convenient for your own separate use."

Cecil crossed the threshold as he spoke, and a little involuntary cry of rapturous admiration escaped her lips, as her eyes kindled at the beauty of the four apartments, all spacious, lofty, sunshiny, picturesque. From the entrance, she could look through the entire suite, the rear room of which was the sleeping apartment, the next the bath-room, the third the dressing-room, and the fourth in which she stood, her boudoir. All were furnished *en suite*, the prevailing tint a dainty cream, relieved with dashes of luscious crimson and shining silver.

There was absolutely nothing lacking that could have been imagined. Every luxury that a connoisseur could have selected was there, every dainty elegance, every extravagant luxury, beauty in every form of statuary, flowers, paintings, laces, deep springy couches, soft snowy rugs, rare crystal ornaments—not an elegance missing which the most covetous imagination could desire.

She turned to Mr. Carriscourt with quivering lips and humid eyes:

"Oh, how can I thank you! It is so perfect—and I am not worthy of it."

He utterly ignored her last half-whispered sentence.

"I thought you would be satisfied. See this, Cecil—this is your own private garden, I had it made hoping you would find many hours of delight in it. The flowers are thriving finely, and under Hyslop's care it will be a perfect bower shortly. See, Cecil."

He pointed to a lovely, partly shaded plot of ground, just beneath the windows of her rooms, that was terraced in wide parterres, and inclosed with a thick shrubbery, just beginning to blossom, in the soft May weather.

"You can see the turrets of your old home, you see, Cecil, from your windows—that will, of course, be a very pleasant source of contemplation for you. And here, leading to the garden and terraces below is the private flight of stairs which communicates with no other part of the house. The key is always on the inside, and you can let yourself in and out at your pleasure."

He was so solicitous for her welfare and her comfort and happiness, and somehow Cecil felt as if she were an intruder among all this beauty he had arranged for her.

"I thank you," she said, simply; it was all she could say, and then, he escorted her to a large easy-chair in the bay window that commanded such a glorious view of lawn and park, just as Mrs. Siddons tapped on the door, and on being bidden, entered, followed by a couple of servants bearing lunch, which was deftly, rapidly spread.

"I will attend to Mrs. Carriscourt myself, Mrs. Siddons," Mr. Carriscourt said, pleasantly, and the housekeeper withdrew, leaving them to partake of the *tête-à-tête* lunch.

He was pleasant, friendly in his manner, courteous and attentive. Cecil was grave and charming in her gracious reserve; only once, when she had been taking a long, wistful look at him, as he sat, slowly stirring his tea his gaze fixed far outside on the fair scene—once, Cecil almost cried aloud, as she saw the change that had come over his handsome face in these few little hours. He looked so much older, and so grave, so unspeakably troubled. All the glad light was gone from his eyes, all the *debonnaire* cheeriness from his face, and—it was her work, her blighting work.

She sat looking at him, all her heart in her eyes, and as if he felt magnetically, the power of her glance, he turned his head toward her, meeting her intense, pitying eyes.

She flushed, painfully, and dropped her lids, but he made no remark.

After lunch was partaken, he excused himself, bidding Cecil take an hour's rest, and telling her he would send Mrs. Siddons up with the new maid he had chosen for her, so that her young mistress might be in readiness with her toilet when she arose to dress for the eight o'clock dinner.

Then, when he had left her, Cecil walked slowly through the luxurious rooms, her pure, dainty face full of deepest pity and hopelessness.

"How will it end? Oh, if I only were sure—sure—how can I learn whether it was a mistake, or a terrible truth?"

And then, with a glad little exclamation, Cecil's old friend and maid Kitty, trim and pretty, came through the rooms to her.

"Oh, Miss Cecil—Mrs. Carriscourt, I mean!"

And while Cecil greeted the young girl kindly, her heart was full of thankfulness that was almost a pain at her husband's kindness.

She allowed Kitty to arrange the couch for a short siesta. Later, she arose, bathed and dressed, ready for the elaborate dinner that was always served at Carris Court.

After dinner, she and Mr. Carriscourt went into one of the drawing-rooms, where he showed her many of its marvelous attractions. She played and sung for him, while he leaned back in a shadowy corner, watching her in all her lovely girlish beauty and grace, that was so enhanced by the pale blue silk *princesse* dress she wore—one of the many elegant toilets she had found in her wardrobe—another proof of his kind thoughtfulness and delicacy, and thinking how pitifully life was beginning for them.

As it struck eleven, Cecil arose to retire. Mr. Carriscourt offered her his arm, and escorted her through the quiet, silent halls to the door of her room, and there, turned toward her with a grave face.

"Good-night, Cecil. My duty ends here. Before I leave you I will give you this—it locks the door of communication between your apartments and those which, to avoid gossip among the servants, I have been obliged to take for my own. The door is locked, Cecil; this is the only key in the house that will unlock that door. I give it to you."

She took the key with her hand trembling, her lovely face paling at thought of the sorrow she had brought upon this noble, generous man. She bowed, not daring to trust herself to speak, and retired to her room, while Mr. Carriscourt returned to the library below.

And that was the way life began at Carris Court for them.

And between the beginning and the end—if either had but foreseen the misery of the way!

CHAPTER XV.

THE MAN THAT WAS TRUSTED.

THE addition to the Pemberton household of Elma Pemberton was certainly marked by the novelty of several new departures from the hitherto bachelor character of the family.

Mr. Griffith Pemberton spent a portion of every evening in the parlor, listening to Elma play and sing, which she did very creditably and with a perfect consciousness of her own ability that more than once amused and puzzled Mr. Pemberton.

"You are not in the least like your mother," he said to her. "My sister Genevieve was reserved and shy almost to coldness, and yet she had a heart warm and loving as ever beat. You certainly are not like her in some respects."

Elma had gone on softly striking chords while he spoke.

"I dare say I am like my father," she said, carelessly, when Mr. Pemberton interrupted her fiercely:

"We never mention that person within these walls, either directly or indirectly; remember that, Elma."

A little gust of temper shone in her black eyes, and she arose from the piano-stool angrily.

"I am sure that no one has the right to forbid me speaking of my own—"

She involuntarily topped on the threshold of the offensive word, for Mr. Pemberton's face was white with scarcely-restrained passion that actually terrified the girl.

"It is not necessary to discuss the subject. You understand my command; you have only to obey it."

And after that Elma was a little particular what use she made of her independent whims before her uncle, although in her heart she rebelled, and hated because she feared him.

That same evening, while Elma and Mr. Pemberton and Cuthbert were together in the parlors, Hiram Fletcher and Miss Ogden were discussing the girl, in Miss Ogden's sitting-room, a pleasant, comfortable apartment, which, with a bedroom, had been assigned to her special use by the housekeeper.

"It will never do for Elma to act as she does," Fletcher was saying, almost severely, and Miss Ogden sat with cold, impassive face listening. "I have already explained, over and over again, how exceedingly important it is that she should seek to please and attract Mr. Pemberton by sweetness and obedience, rather than so persistently demand her own way, and give him such sharp answers. It doesn't speak well for the way you have brought her up."

Miss Ogden's sallow cheeks flushed.

"How could you know all the trouble she has given me? You were never with—I mean Elma is headstrong and willful, and from her babyhood she has been so. I have devoted my life to her. I have sacrificed—you know all the sweet privileges I have sacrificed—and now,

this very day, she became angry with me because I reproved her for expressing her aversion to you, and she threatened to—discharge me!"

Fletcher's pale eyes flashed, then a still more impassive look settled on his shrewd face.

"That is part of what was to be expected. So she has an aversion for me, has she, and threatens to discharge you? Well—" and a little, slow, cold smile crept to his thin lips, and he caressed his long, carefully-trimmed whiskers, in a meditative sort of way, while Miss Ogden watched him anxiously—"I cannot see that there remains anything for either you or I but to accept the young heiress's opinion and treatment. But—this one thing must be understood, and that is, that Elma shall change her treatment of her uncle. I happen to know that he is not as well pleased as he expected to be, and, if she continues to make an unfavorable impression upon him, it would be just like him to alter all his plans, and refuse to make her his heiress."

"In such a case, Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton would be the heir?"

"Undoubtedly. And therefore you will appreciate what I wish further to speak of. Has Elma left any lover behind her?"

Miss Ogden looked confused for one brief minute. Her face paled before this man of whom she evidently was in some fear.

"Elma has never entertained an idea of love or marriage," she said, hastily. "She has no affection in her heart for any one. She is not capable of love or even ardent friendship. I am sorry to say it, but you must already have seen she cares for no one besides herself. No, there never was a lover. Elma is ambitious, and I dare say would be glad to make a grand marriage, and certainly there was no one in Florence to attract her."

"Then—she must be distinctly told that a grand marriage is possible. She must marry Cuthbert Pemberton. He is disposed to rather admire her, and has frankly told me he would marry her for her money, if for nothing else. You see how it will be? In case—anything happens—such a marriage will be extremely convenient."

His shrewd pale eyes glittered excitedly as he explained himself in a low, guarded tone; and Miss Ogden listened intently.

"Yes," she almost whispered, "Elma must marry him."

Fletcher arose to go, bidding her an indifferent good-evening. He went quickly through the dimly-lighted, silent corridor, until he reached the main hall, and then slackened his walk, looking about him with keen, gloating interest in his eyes.

"It will be a good inheritance," he thought, jubilantly. "A princess might be glad to fare as well as Elma has the opportunity of doing. There are riches unlimited, and all that riches can command. There is position that cannot be taken from her—as Cuthbert Pemberton's wife. She will reign here, and be respected and happy—she will occupy just such a position as I would like to occupy were I a woman. But—" and his pale eyes gleamed redly as he heard the girlish sound of her laughter floating up from the parlors—"since it is not possible, in the course of human events, that I should ever possess a title of a title to the Pemberton estate, or the Pemberton position, or the Pemberton name—the next best thing is that—Cuthbert Pemberton should marry—his cousin Elma!"

And with a curious little mirthless laugh he entered the hall leading to Mr. Pemberton's office, where, a moment before, Mr. Pemberton himself had come directly from the parlor.

His face was clouded and gloomy, and in his blue eyes were traces of the smothered rage he had felt a little while before upon exhibition of Elma's insolent independence.

He answered Fletcher's light tap preparatory to his entrance.

"Come in! I have just left the young people together in the parlor. Fletcher"—and he sighed heavily—"I am disappointed in that girl."

Fletcher's face twitched under cover of the hand he suddenly put before it.

"Disappointed, sir? I am deeply grieved to hear you express yourself so. She is certainly very pretty and elegant and well educated, and—"

"Yes, yes, pretty and elegant, and in a measure well enough book-learned," Mr. Pemberton interrupted, impatiently pulling at his frosty mustache. "But it is a prettiness that is not soul beauty, and an elegance that comes rather from the set rules of some fashionable finishing institute for young ladies than the true courtesy that arises from a refined nature. Yes, Fletcher, I am disappointed—and yet, when I

consider that her father was just such a bold, dashing, superficial person, I ought not to be disappointed so keenly."

He walked slowly up and down the room, his eyes bent thoughtfully on the floor.

"I have been cross-questioning her," he resumed, gloomily, "and I have discovered that she has a soul no higher than delight in pretty dresses and show and gayety. She cannot converse intelligently on art or literature, although she has all the popular trashy novels of the day by heart. She openly confesses she never studies, declaring she has finished her education. She says she never sews, or makes charity visits, or engages herself in any occupation but that of enjoying herself selfishly. There is very, very little of the Pemberton blood in her," and he contracted his brow in displeasure. "And yet—she is my niece," he added, gloomily.

"Yes, Mr. Pemberton, she is your own sister's child; nothing can alter that fact. If, as you think, she has inherited more of the Fair—more of her father's traits than her mother's, I am sure you cannot blame the girl for it. You can educate her and elevate her to your own standard, and make her just what you wish."

He was looking almost anxiously at Mr. Pemberton's cold, stern face, that was momentarily growing more stern and cold.

"I am not sure of that," he returned, bitterly. "She is willful and insolent, yes, actually insolent, Fletcher. Less than an hour ago she answered me saucily and defiantly—and I am sure you, Fletcher, she is the only woman who ever presumed to set me at defiance, and his eyes rained menacing lightning—"she must not attempt it again."

Fletcher's thin lips compressed themselves as he listened, an enraged light gleaming in his pale eyes.

"I will see that she does not offend again, sir. I will speak to Miss Ogden, and Miss Elma will doubtless understand her thoughtless error as she should understand it."

Mr. Pemberton's lips curled beneath his drooping white mustache that he still pulled almost

"In confidence, Fletcher—as I have many a time spoken to you before—I am convinced that I never shall be able to take that girl to my heart as I had hoped so many years to do. I dare say I have placed my ideal too high, which is one reason of my keen disappointment in her. But—there is something about her that, from the bottom of my soul I wish was different—something that dissatisfies me almost to a dislike, almost to a repulsion. Strange, too, that in such a short time she should leave such an unfortunate impression upon me."

He knit his brows as he walked and talked, and Fletcher's own face was unusually impassive and inscrutable as he followed him with watchful eyes.

"I am more than ever determined that Cuthbert Pemberton shall marry her," he told himself. "They shall all play into my hands, at my good pleasure. The object for which I have lived for eighteen years, worked, saved and schemed, is approaching its crisis. Fate itself is in league with me—and even were it not, I would defy it to thwart me!"

CHAPTER XVI.

FACE TO FACE.

LIFE at Carris Court went on just as it had begun. The beautiful spring days came and went, when the fair estate lay bathed in sunshine, and was radiant with life and loveliness. The birds caroled among the blossoms, that showered their fragrant snow to give place to the glad young leaves. The flowers bloomed, and Cecil's own private garden, shut in by the tall budding syringa bushes Hyssop had transplanted, daily grew to a most lovely spot where Cecil spent much of her time.

But—all the ecstasy of life, all the revelry of gladness was without the walls of Carris Court. No joy or happiness found its way within to the fated two who were each going their appointed way, so severed, yet so fatefully united.

Yet, there was no sharp, piercing misery to endure. It was rather a quiet acceptance of the trouble that had come—especially to Mr. Carriscourt, who, while he failed to penetrate the secret of Cecil's actions, did not lose his hope that soon it would be righted.

They had been married just a month, and Cecil had, in that little while, come to know and to love every inch of ground at Carris Court. During those few weeks she had become thoroughly familiarized with her new home, and had it not been for the abyss between them, she would have been perfectly happy.

The arrangement which Cecil had made between herself and Mr. Carriscourt remained the same. No brother could have been more devoted than Mr. Carriscourt was to her; indeed, a brother would have been more affectionately demonstrative. He never kissed her—she often thought of it with bitter intentness—he never had kissed her since the wedding ceremony had been said.

He always conducted her to her apartments with the same grave courtesy, never visiting her rooms, unless, as Cecil sometimes did, she invited him to take lunch in her boudoir.

He never annoyed her by reference to their strangely divided life, and was in all things just exactly what Cecil wished him to be.

But he never forgot for one moment the dull heartache he experienced, although Cecil failed to read any such signs. He never forgot the pitiful fact that the woman he loved had of her own accord preferred to erect this barrier between them.

So their life went on, not unpleasantly, and certainly marked by many enjoyments which Cecil felt not the slightest compunction to receive and give. They had their daily drives and walks. They received their guests, entertaining elegantly. They performed their social duties promptly, and servants and guests united in emphatically regarding them as a model pair, so thoroughly, devotedly, unostentatiously and undemonstratively attached to each other.

This especial day was in early June, one of that royal month's most royal days, and despite the beauty of the summer weather Cecil had been unusually weary and dejected all day.

In the morning she had driven Mr. Carriscourt over to the depot in her phaeton, making a long *d'tour* home, returning in time for lunch. In the afternoon she had studied her German awhile, in which she was rapidly perfecting herself. Then she had devoted an hour to hard practice on one of Beethoven's sonatas, but even the music did not rest or comfort her, and almost in sheer despair she retired to her rooms.

"I am unusually weary and depressed to-day. I wonder why it is so? I am not sick, or enervated by the warm weather, but there is a terrible weight upon me, mentally and physically, that even with all my experience of trouble is new."

She walked up and down through her rooms, her lovely head drooped despondently on her breast, her hands clasped behind her.

"It must be because I have nothing especially depending upon me, because I am wasting all my time in selfishness. Yes! I believe that is why I am depressed. I need actual occupation for my head and my hands. I will begin this very day, and, with Kitty's assistance, I will find my charity women and sick parish children for whom I used to interest myself when I was at Marchbrook."

She summoned Kitty, and finding there was no material in the house suitable for the charitable sewing contemplated, she had her ponies and carriage again brought to the door, and drove to the adjoining village for a supply of muslins, flannels and calicoes.

It was sunset before she returned, and she had only time to take her bath, and make her toilet, before Mr. Carriscourt should return from the city.

She dressed with unusual care that evening, and Kitty rapturously insisted she never had looked so lovely before as in the delicate silver-green silk princess dress, with its moss fringes, sprinkled with dewdrop beads of cut crystal.

At dinner, Mr. Carriscourt watched her intently, thinking what a perfect creature she was, in all her girlish beauty and grace, and thinking that it was a duty he owed her to take her out into the gay world where she might, if possible, forget at least some of her trials and griefs.

"I saw a friend of mine to-day, Cecil, who is very anxious to see—my wife. He had read the announcement of the—marriage in the papers, and his congratulations were delightful and genuine. He has sent a pressing invitation to you to make a visit at his home. His name is Mr. Griffith Pemberton, and he lives in the city. You may have heard me mention him before."

"I do not remember. If he is your friend, I would be glad to have him for mine as well. We will accept Mr. Pemberton's invitation, if you wish."

"I think you would enjoy such a visit, Cecil. Mr. Pemberton's niece is with him, his dead sister's daughter, for whom he searched for years before he discovered her. She is a remarkably

handsome girl, I have heard, and destined by birth, education and beauty, no less than the immense fortune to which she will be heir, to become a star in society."

And so, by casual mention, these two women began to gravitate toward each other, all unconscious of the Fate that so ordained it.

After dinner, Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil adjourned to the parlor, where, as usual, there was music, and, to-night, a game of chess.

Cecil told him of her plans for the poor about Carris Court, and received his cordial indorsement, and offers of assistance at any time. They arranged for one or two dinner-parties, and then, the hour being nearly eleven, Cecil, as usual, arose to go, and Mr. Carriscourt escorted her to her room, leaving her at the door with a quiet good-night.

Usually he returned to the parlor, or library, but to-night he went directly to his own apartments, from where he could hear the soft strains of music from Cecil's boudoir piano, at which, in her unusual spell of restlessness, she seated herself, after she had dismissed Kitty for the night.

He stood and listened, as one would hearken to melody from the heaven to which he was denied admittance, his whole passionate heart in his eyes, in the very attitude of his listening.

And while he stood listening the music stopped, and he turned away from the silence, his face grave and pale and troubled.

Cecil did not think of sleep, yet. The restlessness that had been partly assuaged came back upon her in full force, and she walked to and fro in a nervous excitement entirely new to her.

"I feel as if I never should sleep again! I feel as if something was about to happen to me. I am alarmed, I know not why. I—"

She had that instant turned in her rapid, nervous walk at the extreme rear of the suit of rooms, and, as she raised her head to glance at the clock that hung on the wall, a sudden paralyzing horror seized her in a powerlessness of fear, for, standing in the middle of the room, whose threshold she was passing, was a man, with menacing, uplifted hand, looking her straight in the eye.

"Hush! If you value your safety, hush!"

And, with a low, agonized moan of horror Cecil gasped the name that almost refused to leave her stammering tongue.

"Sydney!"

It sounded like a whisper from a vault, so hollow, so horrified, so heart-pitiful.

It was enough. That reception of Cuthbert Pemberton told him all he wanted to be told. It at once allayed any misgiving he may have had as to the practicableness of carrying out his diabolical schemes.

The undisguised fear and horror told him that Cecil believed that it was Sydney Valence who stood before her—Sydney Valence, the man she had married—under the roof with her, and she, the wife of another husband!

A merciless smile stirred beneath his heavy mustache, a smile of satisfaction in anticipation of his easy victory.

All this while Cecil stood there as if transformed to marble, her face deathly white, her blue eyes full of frozen horror, her hands clasped in piteous dismay.

"Oh, Sydney! I—I—thought you were—dead! They said you were dead!"

She whispered the words that freshly confirmed his assurance that he had nothing further to fear from her disbelief in his identity. Her pitiful, gasping words effectually settled the affair for him.

"But you see it was a mistake. Don't look so horrified, Cecil. Control yourself."

She walked uncertainly to the nearest chair, and actually fell upon it, trembling in every limb, gazing at the bold, handsome face that seemed to fascinate her with such strange terror.

He glanced toward the inner rooms.

"Is your maid yonder?"

Cecil shook her head in speechless terror.

"You are entirely alone—but for me?"

She drew a little quivering breath as she nodded again, realizing that she was so awfully, awfully alone. And yet, he was her husband; and yet, she would not, if she could, have aroused the household.

Poor Cecil! Her heart almost seemed to stop as Pemberton stepped to the door through which he had come—the door that opened on the private flight of stairs to the garden below, and which Cecil, in a confused sort of way supposed she must have neglected to secure—and turned the key in the lock.

"You need not be alarmed, Cecil. I have been waiting for an opportunity to see you pri-

vately ever since that day you saw me on the street. I have much I wish to say to you. First, answer me this one question, Cecil, have you ceased to love me?"

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN'S PRICE.

CECIL recoiled with perfect horror at the abrupt question.

"Love you—love you!" she gasped, in tones that thrilled with pitiful scornfulness. "I never loved you, never! I was a child bound down with the crushing weight of sorrow, and I thought because you urged me to—to marry you, that—that it was love that made me consent. But, I never, never loved you, Sydney! Oh, what have I not suffered from that one fatal act! And now, now you come to—drive me insane—and I was sure you were dead!"

"And, from present appearances, very sorry that it is not as you thought. Well, Cecil, I was only seriously hurt, and although it was given out that I was killed, my friend, the coroner, obligingly received a hundred-dollar bill to help keep up the delusion. I had friends, you see, who hated to see me surrendered to justice. In reality, I was ill a long time, delirious and weak. When I recovered my senses and my strength, my first business was to seek you, which I did—only to find you—married to another man."

He looked reproach at her, his low, intense words curdling her very blood.

"Yes, yes, married to another husband," she said, wildly, clasping her hands in an ecstasy of awful, realizing terror, "married, and you alive!"

"You have stated the case exactly, Cecil; how do you suppose I feel—to come back almost from the grave, another Enoch Arden—for, since I discovered you, I have haunted you continually. How do you think I feel, Cecil, not only to find you Clyde Carriscourt's wife, but, to hear you openly declare, almost with loathing, that you do not love me, that you never loved me? And yet—you are my wife."

Cecil threw up her hands in a gesture of despair that was heart-breaking to see.

"Don't! Don't! I cannot bear it! Oh, my God, my God, be merciful and show me some way—any way—of escape from this terrible consequence of my unconscious wrong-doing!"

Pemberton's vile heart involuntarily throbbed in swift sympathy for the passionate, despairing anguish in her voice. But only for a second. The next he repeated his quiet, cruel words:

"Yes, Cecil, you are my wife—you—"

"I tell you to be silent! I cannot, I cannot endure this! I—"

He interrupted her coolly:

"I do not see how you can help enduring it, Cecil. It is through no fault of mine that you have placed yourself in the unenviable position of a woman with two husbands—placed yourself so that, if, in case I claim you as—"

She shrunk away in quivering horror, her sweet face ashen, her blue eyes almost starting from her head.

"Claim me—claim me! You dare not do that—oh, you could not be so cruel, so awfully cruel!"

He smiled; that made her shiver with repulsion, and he, the man she had been so mad, so mad as to marry, imagining she loved him!

"If you call it cruelty for a man to desire to have his wife," he said, "I call it very natural and proper, and the laws you have violated would agree with me. Besides—you are a very charming woman, Cecil; any man would be proud of you for his wife."

Her blue eyes were dilating in agony and fear as she listened; then she suddenly sprang from her chair and confronted him.

"You shall never claim me! I will take my life in my own hands, and die before your eyes before I would go to you as your wife! Yes—I would let them arrest me for—the crime you say I have committed against the laws of the country—but not against the law of my God, Sydney Valence!—remember that—remember that!"

All her womanly courage had sprung to the brief contest. Her face glowed palely, her blue eyes shot out fires of desperate determination as she stood before him in all her sweetness and spirit and grace.

His heart thrilled under her intensity of word and dramatic strength of manner. Her spirit and menacing audacity delighted and fascinated him as even her beauty had not done.

"She is a royal creature," he thought; "a foeman worthy of my steel. Refined, sensitive, pure as an angel, brave yet completely crushed

by the circumstances she thinks are genuine; just what my ideal woman should be. By the great Jupiter Pluvius, if my cousin Elma were such a creature, I'd marry her off-hand to-morrow, without a dollar to call her own!"

He was the picture of insolent coolness as he sat there, in the very chair Mr. Carriscourt preferred to use on his friendly formal acceptance of Cecil's sisterly invitation to lunch or tea.

"Very well, then," he retorted, an evil gleam in his black eyes as he softly caressed his long, luxuriant side-whiskers, "since you prefer either death or disgrace to returning to me as my wife, I will select for you—and then, claim you still. Cecil—"

She interrupted him with an imperious gesture of her hand.

"Please to remember that I prefer to be addressed by the honorable name by which I am known. Mrs. Carriscourt, if you please."

He smiled, sneeringly.

"Yes? It is very immaterial by what name you are called, especially since you have no more claim to this one than any other you might select at random. But to please you—Mrs. Carriscourt"—and the sneer in his voice appalled her—"I will leave you, for the present, and seek—Mr. Carriscourt. I dare say he has not retired, or, if he has, he will see me, I think. Rather romantic, isn't it?"

And this the man she had imagined she loved! He would arouse the house, see Mr. Carriscourt, and thereby bring down upon their heads the terrible ruin she would gladly have given her life to avert.

All her courage forsook her, as the pitiable consequences came face to face with her. The ashen pallor gathered on her face again, and the unspeakable anguish to her blue eyes.

Pemberton saw it, and smiled wickedly.

"I thought you would reconsider your decision," he said, coolly. "It is not such a light thing for a woman who has deceived and betrayed one husband by representing herself a maiden, when she imagined herself the widow of a criminal, and in reality was his wife—to deliberately brave him."

"But I thought you were dead. Everybody thought so. It was a mistake any one under the same circumstances would have made. Besides"—and again that undaunted spirit flamed up in her agonized young voice—"I never really was your wife! You know it was so—that, beyond the simple marriage ceremony, there was no marriage."

"Yes," Pemberton said, shrewdly following the lead she was unconsciously giving him, "I know that. But I also know this—that you deliberately prefer Mr. Clyde Carriscourt, because he is rich and noted, but to whom you have no shadow of a right, for your reputed husband, rather than the criminal whose wife you really are."

"I prefer Mr. Carriscourt because he is a noble, true-hearted gentleman, whom no one could help respecting and revering. Oh, go away, go away now! I have only such bitter, deathless dislike and aversion for you."

He smiled slowly—that smile that made her blood change, in feeling, to creeping drops of ice.

"Is that all? Are you not omitting one emotion?"

He straightened from the lazy insolence of his position, and looked smilelessly, mercilessly, at her.

She did not answer, but sat there wondering what else could happen to her.

"You fear me," he said, slowly, emphatically. "And it is right—a natural you should fear me. I am guiltless in this affair, while you"—and his voice was as stern and reproachful as though he had been indeed in solemn earnest—"you have laid a terrible sin on your conscience, sullied your fair honor, deceived and cruelly outraged the trust reposed in you by two men—your two husbands! Yes, you do well to fear."

She had drooped her lovely head on her breast, his words sweeping over her like a storm over a swaying lily. Then she lifted her face, gray to alarmingness.

"I am not afraid—of what you can do to me. My heart was crushed long ago—it needs a very little more—and I would welcome it, I would welcome it! But for him—him! innocent, noble, unconscious as he is—the man to whom I gave my latest, truest vows, he shall be spared—because—because—I love him, I love him! And I will spare him if I die to do it!"

There was a look in her eyes, a ring to her voice, a wild, passionate despair in her manner, that told this villain he had gone nearly to the end of his tether for that occasion.

"She's the gamest little creature I ever saw, by Jove! and the truest woman that ever lived, I'll swear!" he thought, hastily; then aloud:

"I would not like to drive you to desperation," he said, with thoughtful and admirably assumed gravity. "You do not spare me by hesitating to express your feelings toward me, nor do I see any necessity on my part for concealing the motive that brought me here. Cecil, you will not deny that you are my wife. You will honestly admit that Mr. Carriscourt has not the shadow of a claim upon you. I will say this—that, while I will never give you up, while I shall insist upon being afforded the privilege of seeing you when and where I choose, I will consent that affairs remain *in statu quo*—provided—"

Cecil's lips curled in hot scorn and contempt.

"It is like you! You will buy your silence with money! My God! To think I ever even cared for this man! Here! Here is money—the price of my peace, the price of his peace! Take it, and go—oh, leave me before I go mad!"

She snatched a handful of bills from the little safe near her, and thrust them in his hand, and then, her hands clasping her throat, clutching as if for breath, she saw him bow, coolly, smiling, as he stood at the head of the flight of stairs.

"You have saved yourself until I see you again, Cecil, my dear! Until the next time—*au revoir!*"

CHAPTER XVIII.

WILL SHE OR WILL SHE NOT?

CUTHBERT PEMBERTON'S evil, handsome face wore a smile of elated delight as he hurried down the inclosed flight of stairs leading to Cecil's garden, through which he could readily and silently escape, to the main grounds, and from thence to the small side-gate of whose existence, and infrequent use, and great privacy, he had learned during the few hours of close espionage he had given to Cecil's surroundings, and a still closer study of the way of reaching her.

As has been seen, he was successful—so successful that he went leisurely down the stairway, and through the garden, little imagining that a pair of astonished eyes were watching him as he went—Clyde Carriscourt's eyes, full of a piteous, passionate pain.

Outside the gate, on the quiet, starlighted road, his horse was picketed—one he had hired from the neighboring village upon his arrival in the afternoon. He sprang upon him, crammed the money in his vest-pockets, and galloped back to the tavern, where he told the landlord how charming his romantic ride had been, how beautiful the country was in the solemn midnight hush. The landlord paid liberally for his accommodations, letting a word or two drop, apparently very inadvertently, about it being a farewell visit to a neighborhood that held painful recollections, but which he never expected to see again; signed his name on the travelers' register as Sydney Valence, shook hands with mine host and caught the owl train for the city.

Three hours later, he was comfortably ensconced in his easy-chair in his room at his hotel, a cigar between his lips, a pile of bills on the table beside him, on which his eyes gloated jubilantly.

"I have stumbled upon a veritable gold mine," he thought, triumphantly; "but it was a deuced close risk to take. I was not sure she would not detect the truth that I am not Syd, but it could not have turned out more to my satisfaction than it did. She honestly believes I am her husband, and—Cuthbert, my boy, it will be because you've parted with a large portion of your mother-wit if she discovers her mistake in a hurry."

He leaned back in his chair, expiring tiny smoke-wreaths from his mouth, watching them resolve and fade, with a look of intense satisfaction and triumphant self-gratulation on his face.

"It's a risky business," he thought—"deuced risky; but I am one of the sort who firmly believe that 'nothing venture, nothing have.' What a charming sensation it would make if it were known in social circles that I, Pemberton of the clubs, Pemberton of the 5th avenue, nephew of the Grand Mogul, was up to this business! And Carriscourt and the old gentleman on friendly terms, too! By Jove, my boy, you've got to be precious careful, and wise as a serpent."

He laughed lightly, as he tossed his cigar-end away, and carefully counted the money over again.

"Seven hundred dollars will do very well for

one night's work, very well. I doubt if the fair Cecil had the slightest idea of how much she gave me. What a grand creature she is," he thought, his face growing eager and admiring. "the most perfect girl I ever saw! And," and a puzzled, thoughtful expression came to his bold black eyes. "I verily believe she is conscientious enough to insist upon occupying separate rooms from Carriscourt, since she believes that poor devil of a Syd is still alive. It must be so, for I saw no signs of a man's occupancy of the apartments. It's rather puritanical, to my thinking, but it's deuced lucky for me, because I am at far less risk in visiting her, which, by Jove, I shall not be slow in doing."

He put away Cecil's hush-money and prepared for a few hours' sleep.

At nine o'clock he breakfasted and then, in irreproachable morning toilet, went to call upon Elma Pemberton, with the determination in his mind to lose no time in making love to her, and persuading her to marry him.

He found her just preparing to go on a shopping expedition. The coach and horses, with servants in livery, were awaiting her at the door, and Elma was just stuffing her portemonnaie with the bills Mr. Pemberton had given her, as Cuthbert stepped into the morning parlor with a graceful, familiar "Good-morning."

He was looking very handsome and stylish in her toilet of black silk, heavily trimmed with jet fringes. A massive gold necklace and locket was suspended from her neck, and instead of white lace there was a profusion of black lace at her throat and wrists—an effect which was remarkably becoming to her pronounced beauty.

Her sleeves were several inches shorter than her arms, and her plump wrists were circled with wide heavy bracelets just where her gloves ended. Her hair was a golden *crêpe* mass of puffs and fringe over her forehead, and she wore a fashionable bonnet of black lace and jet.

Pemberton took in her elegance of appearance at a glance.

"She is handsome—there is not a doubt of it, and will attract attention and incite admiration wherever she goes. I would never have need to blush for her, as my wife—and yet, she lacks all that patrician elegance and absolutely high-bred air that she assuredly should possess considering her superior birth. Cecil possesses all those characteristics, which even in her distress are so marked—the grand, proud, beautiful, spirited creature! By Jove, if there only could be a fairy transformation!"

Elma snapped her portemonnaie with a pleased, self-satisfied air—unlimited supplies of money, a credit account at Stewart's and command of all the luxury she desired, was such a delightfully novel experience to her.

"You are very welcome, cousin, but you will have to excuse me," she said, graciously, as she gathered up her train scientifically. "I really have to leave you, and I am afraid I shall be gone until quite late."

"That is too cruel of you! Couldn't you temper mercy with—perhaps deserved justice, and—let me go with you on your shopping tour? I am a capital escort—patient and a connoisseur in laces and silks. We will have a delightful lunch somewhere, quite *tête-à-tête*, and go to the matinee afterward."

Her black eyes sparkled.

"That would be lovely! Yes—you may go. Besides, I want to talk to you."

"You are an angel," he said, in a low, intense tone that was full of the broad flattery he knew Elma liked.

"And I particularly wished for the opportunity of having a quiet talk with you, Elma," he said, after they had taken their seats in the carriage and the order was given to Stewart's.

"So we are both suited," she said, gayly. "I want to know if you can tell me whether or not my uncle Griffith is obliged to make me his heiress, or—if he chooses, can he leave his property and money elsewhere—to you, for instance?"

The boldness of her point-blank question would have appalled any other man. As it was, the want of delicacy grated unpleasantly upon him, even while it instantly occurred to him that she had given him the very best possible cue to the attainment of his own ends.

He softly stroked his long, jetty silken whiskers—a habit he had when something was specially at stake.

"Since you have seen fit to confide in me sufficiently to ask me such a direct family question, Elma, I will be equally frank with you, and tell you the precise truth. I am positive that Mr. Pemberton will use his discretion and judgment and inclination in willing his immense property to the person he likes best, very few

properties in this country are entailed. Men do as they please with their own—very often bequeathing immense legacies in most erratic directions, to the impoverishment of near relatives. Of course such wills are often contested, but—"

He shrugged his shoulders eloquently.

"I know all that," she returned, impatiently. "But what I do want to know is—if there is a doubt about my being uncle Griffith's heiress? Fletcher and that disagreeable Miss Ogden are continually telling me I shall be more careful in pleasing my uncle, for fear, after all, I fail in being his heiress. Cousin Cuthbert—do you think I shall be disappointed? I want to know. I have a special reason for wanting to know whether the wealth is to be mine, or—yours, for there is no one else."

Pemberton's black eyes sparkled at her earnest question.

"It will certainly be one of us. For your own sake—I hope, most sincerely, to see you own the Pemberton possessions."

"You speak as if you had misgivings."

She leaned forward toward him, intent and earnest. He pretended an admirable embarrassment.

"You should not press me, Elma, to say anything which can vex or disappoint you. Let me change the topic somewhat and tell you of a way in which you may become as rich as you are beautiful."

She blushed slightly, and shot him a furtive glance, and he saw the swift, pale confusion that had been on her face at his first words, disappear into intent curiosity.

"I hope you will not think I am hasty or abrupt, or that so short an acquaintance does not warrant me in telling you that you have completely captivated me, Elma. Your beauty, your grace, your sweetness, have charmed me as no other woman ever has been able to do. I have never considered myself a marrying man, for all the many chances that have been offered me. But, you have made me change my mind. You made me love you the moment I saw you. I can think of nothing but you; Elma, will you marry me?"

He was in intense earnest so far as wanting her for her money. He was competent to perfectly simulate a passion he did not feel. He knew the girl's inordinate love for undiluted compliment, and he measured his length in her favor exactly.

She sat looking at him, smilingly, pleased with his flowery speech, and thinking it sounded just like a novel.

Instead of accepting him, or paling or blushing in the orthodox way, as he certainly expected, Elma looked thoughtfully at him.

"Then, it is by marrying you that I may become rich? Then, you are the heir and not I the heiress?"

"Do not make me utter such cruel words, Elma. Tell me you love me, and will share the riches with me. Such a marriage will be very acceptable to Mr. Pemberton. You will have an enviable position in society. We will enjoy ourselves as we please, and I will devote my life to you, Elma. Will you marry me?"

She twisted her heavy bracelets in thoughtfulness. He was not specially flattered at her manner, and a new fresh feeling of repulsion flashed over him beautiful though she was; and an involuntary thought of Cecil Carriscourt and her loveliness accompanied it.

"You must let me consider the honor you have paid me. I like you—very well, cousin Cuthbert, but I am not sure I—care to—marry. Wait a few days, and I will tell you."

And, for the first time, Cuthbert Pemberton respected this girl he was so ready to marry for her money.

"I must see what I can do to quiet Thorsby," Elma told herself as she tumbled the silks on Stewart's counter.

And Pemberton, lounging easily behind her, was congratulating himself on the success of his clever little *finesse*.

CHAPTER XIX.

INTO DEEPER WATERS.

THAT night, after Mr. Carriscourt had seen the departure of Cuthbert Pemberton from Cecil's room, he had not as much as thought of sleeping or retiring to bed. His first thought had been that a burglar had forced his way into the house, but a second glance during which he had snatched his pistols from his dressing-bureau, had shown him the utter absence of any appearance of ruffianism in the well-dressed, gentlemanly fellow who wore a *boutonnière* in his coat.

His second thought was one of sickening despair. A sudden, swift storm of jealousy and rage and all the passion of love he had for his wife, surged hotly over him, and it was only by a violent effort at self-control that he restrained himself from rushing to Cecil's room, demanding to know who it was and what it meant, demanding and upbraiding her, for this secret that, although he had known lay between them, he had never dreamed was—like this!

It was only for one brief moment that he permitted himself to entertain such a suspicion of the woman he loved so truly.

"It is not that—it is not that," he assured himself, passionately, while his splendid face grew white and haggard with the pitiful vigil he kept all through the gray night.

"There is a secret, a mystery, but my darling is true and pure as the angels! I will not even think of such a cruel thing—but it is so hard, so hard upon me!"

He went down to breakfast, his fair face showing that he had passed a sleepless night, and his eyes full of a gravity that was deeper than their usual expression, but his manner toward Cecil was unchanged—friendly, pleasant and devoted as usual, despite the look he saw in her eyes that betokened the misgivings of her mind—the natural consequence of the events of the preceding night.

Several times during breakfast Cecil happened to meet his glance—and it made her shrink with fear and pain, so full of a wistful, passionately stern inquiry it was.

Could he have any suspicion? Was it possible that he had guessed the truth? Was it possible that he had obtained a clue to her pitiful secret? And her heart beat fast and wildly as she struggled to maintain a composure she was so far from feeling.

Mr. Carriscourt did not intimate by any sign his knowledge of her visitor of the evening previously, but after breakfast was over he ordered the horses and carriage as usual for their morning drive, and was in every respect the same devoted brother, so that Cecil's horrible, momentary misgivings vanished, and, in spite of the actual misery that confronted her, her girlish hope and spirits rose, and she was more joyous than usual, bewitching Mr. Carriscourt with her loveliness and graciousness into even deeper love for her than ever.

"If only I can succeed in keeping the truth from him, if only I am able to spare him," Cecil told herself; "something may happen—something must happen, to bring about my escape. I will try to be patient and trustful in God, who knows I never meant to offend Him."

And so, from noble, sweet conscientiousness, Cecil strove to do the best she could, and the intercourse between herself and Mr. Carriscourt grew daily into a more beautiful and abiding friendship, that had in it nothing of restraint in their brotherly and sisterly relations.

As the days went on, and Mr. Carriscourt, watching her still closely, saw her exquisite womanliness, and tender graciousness of manner that only befitted the truest and best of women, he became more and more convinced that although it had been ill-advised in Cecil to have received her guest in her private sitting-room, yet she certainly had some good reason for it. Still, he could not but feel sore at knowing how debarred he was from her confidence.

"She does not confide in me because I have not yet gained her trust and her affection. She perhaps incurred some little bills preparatory to our marriage, and the tradesman has been requested to apply thus secretly. And yet—it is not like Cecil to do even that."

The days passed—in the usual routine of light duties and social obligations. There was a grand dinner-party at Carriscourt, at which Cecil was unusually charming and attractive, and Mr. Carriscourt noted with new, eager delight, how sweet, and innocently gay she was, fascinating her guests just as she fascinated him.

After they had gone, late that night, they two stood alone beside the open French window, looking out into the exquisite summer night—Mr. Carriscourt thinking how he loved this girl at his side, despite everything, how he would have loved to take her to his heart and caress her and kiss her as he was so wishfully yearning to do.

And Cecil, looking out into the starlighted warmth and fragrance was wondering—would such happiness as, somehow, this night's influence stirred within her, ever be verified? Or, would that terrible unclosed chasm ever yawn between her and this man whose tones and looks stirred her pulses so fiercely.

Almost suddenly, Carriscourt stepped close up

to her, looking down at her face that was so palely radiant in the dusk.

"Cecil, little wife? Is it always to go on thus? I have tried to be patient—but is there no hope for me—yet?"

She blushed, vividly, and gave him just one swift glance before she dropped her lid over her blue eyes. Then he saw the blush fade into a settled pain of pallor that, for a day or two had somewhat lifted from her sweet face. He lifted her hand that lay on the little inlaid table, just inside the curtains, and touched it to his lips—a tender, devoted affection that made her heart throb.

Then she drew her hand gently away, and then—she glanced up with an expression in her face that delighted and puzzled him, so full of a passion she could not control, yet so eloquent of pitiful, wistful pain.

"It is late," she said, gently. "I must go, Mr. Carriscourt. Good-night."

All the sweet sudden hope faded from his face, but he accepted her gentle little reproof, and as usual, escorted her to her door, and then, not feeling in the least like retiring, extinguished all the gas-jets but one, and, turning that down to a tiny yellow point, he drew an easy-chair to the open window, and among the dim shadows, and alone with the starlight and the silence and the fragrance of the night, suffered his thoughts to dwell upon Cecil.

While Cecil, retired to her rooms, found them in charge of Kitty, whom, as had been her custom of late, she dismissed as soon as she entered her apartments for the night.

As usual, to-night, she expected a visit from the man she believed to be her husband—as she had expected every night in a sort of terror, ever since he had been there.

"If I only had never been so mad!" she told herself, bitterly, as she sat wearily down in a little low silken easy-chair.

"I cannot undo the past, but, I can spare him," and a swift, passionate look flashed into her eyes as she impulsively lifted them to a splendid portrait of Mr. Carriscourt that hung over her mantle-shelf, a picture whose eyes seemed to pierce to her very soul. She arose from her chair, and stood beneath the portrait, her hands clasped in a dumbeloquence of tenderness, her whole gesture full of adoration—just as Pemberton's voice startled her, in a sneering, freezing tone:

"Ah! I hope I am not *de trop*, Cecil?"

Although she had schooled herself to be prepared to meet him at any time, still the sound of his voice startled her, at the door she purposely left unlocked till a late hour every night, rather than perhaps disturb the servants or Mr. Carriscourt by a summons, however faint. She did not look to him, but left her position in front of Mr. Carriscourt's picture, for the same one she had occupied upon the occasion of his former visit—the little low chair immediately near the locked door of the rooms occupied by Mr. Carriscourt, the key of which was in her hand. For she was afraid of Pemberton, for all she honestly thought he was Sydney Valence. There had been some strange inexplicable difference taken place in him during those months since she had thought him dead. Whether it was really a change for the worse, or whether she simply saw him as he was, in the light of her association with a man so infinitely his superior, Cecil could not satisfy herself. She only understood more and more keenly the utter insanity of which she had been capable, the terrible, hopeless work of endurance before her, and the unreasoning fear and repulsion which she entertained for him. He came forward, tossing his cane and hat familiarly on the lounge, and took a chair somewhat nearer her than he had ventured upon before.

"You were expecting me, I see," he said, easily, taking a lingering, admiring look at her elaborate dinner *toilette* of white silk and costly lace. "You are dressed fit to see a prince, Cecil; may I venture to thank you for complimenting me so charmingly?"

His half insolent, wholly free language enraged her. Her lips curled in a scorn that he felt to his very soul.

"Any such remarks are entirely unnecessary. And I will inform you now, once for all, sir, that if you utter a syllable that, by the smallest construction I can place upon it, is other than courteous, I will arouse the house, utterly regardless of the consequences. You will remember you are here only on sufferance, and that, at my pleasure, your visits cease."

She was glorious in her spirit and beauty, and Pemberton eyed her with undisguised admiration.

"Every different mood suits you better and more charmingly," he said, but there was a look

of fury in his black eyes Cecil saw was very widely at variance with his words. "You had better weigh your words, Cecil," he went on; "you will allow me to suggest that a husband has a perfect right to say to his wife just—"

"I am not your wife!" she flashed out fiercely. "I am not your wife! Never, for one moment did I occupy that position. In the eyes of the law, to-day, I am free of you; you are dead to the law, you are an escaped criminal, you do not dare—"

He interrupted her, coldly:

"Enough—please, Cecil! We have been over that same ground before, and settled it. You say I do not dare; let me assure you again—I dare do anything—and if you defy me with your threats, and tantalize me by your capriciousness, you will learn that I am a man whose will is my law."

No man could have appeared more absolutely in earnest than Pemberton was, and he thoroughly succeeded in making Cecil feel that such was the case.

"I would rather my occasional visits would be of a more pleasant nature," he added, more gently, as he leaned comfortably back in the chair.

"It rests entirely with you, Cecil, to make them so. It seems difficult for me to reconcile you with the gentle, loving girl who married me."

If she disliked and was repulsed by him when he was defiant and sarcastic, she was filled with sick horror and fear when he assumed the rôle of the affectionate, disappointed lover. Her blue eyes fairly dilated with anguishful alarm, and she clutched the key to Mr. Carriscourt's room with the desperation of a drowning man grasping the one safety within reach.

"You must not remain any longer," she said, struggling bravely with herself. "You have come—for money, of course. I have only a very little, but you may have it—to go."

He frowned. "Only a little! I must have what I want, understand, Cecil. You are the ostensible wife of a very rich man, and I expect you to hand-somely indemnify me for the privilege he enjoys through my good will. You must be prepared for me at all times, Cecil—if you cannot raise the cash by one means then use another. I leave it to your woman's wit. To-night, I will take what you have, but, remember, I shall expect five hundred dollars when I come again—say in a couple of weeks."

Cecil gave a little involuntary exclamation of astonishment.

"It will be impossible—absolutely impossible! You ask of me what no woman could grant. I have already used my allowance for the quarter up on you, and it is absolutely impossible for me to obtain more money."

"Very well," he returned, quietly. "Just as you please, of course. Only, you will have five hundred dollars ready for me in just—say, three weeks from to-night, or I will demand you of Mr. Carriscourt and compel you to go with me as my wife."

She managed to control the desperate struggle within her, and handed him the small roll of bills—the last dollar of the princely amount Mr. Carriscourt had put in her little safe, with the Carriscourt jewels, the day they arrived at Carriscourt.

He took them, and coolly counted them, before he put them in his vest-pocket.

"Thanks. Three weeks, please remember. I have fastidious tastes which Mr. Carriscourt must gratify if he prefers to possess you rather—"

"Hush! Hush!" she said, gaspingly. "You are a heartless, atrocious villain—too outrageous and depraved to let live! Leave my room, or in sheer desperation I will ring for—my husband!"

She flung the words defiantly at him, quivering from head to foot, and, as before, Pemberton saw it was the better part of valor to retire.

"Do not excite yourself," he said, with a smile that curdled her blood, as he leisurely reached for his hat and cane, and walked over to the door leading to the flight of stairs—directly over the window at which Mr. Carriscourt was sitting in the quiet darkness.

"A glorious night, my dear Cecil—although not so delightful as your lovely room and your company. *Au revoir*, Cecil."

And a numb, hideous nightmare seemed to paralyze every nerve and muscle in Mr. Carriscourt's body, as, distinctly as he had heard the easy, *devoté* voice, he saw the tall, elegant figure depart—the very same he had seen before!

And all through the rest of the hours of darkness, Mr. Carriscourt kept his lonely, agonized vigil.

CHAPTER XX.

A MAN'S LOVE.

THAT was a night of the keenest agony of despair Clyde Carriscourt ever could have even imagined. All through its silent darkness he sat there, trying to reason his way out of the pitiful maze into which he had come, but there was no way opened to him. All argument with himself ended where it began, in sharp, sickening dismay, and the gray morning of a dull, sultry summer day brought him no hope or relief, or even respite from this woe that had settled upon him. Of course, it was imperative that he should speak to Cecil about it—it would have been more or less unhuman had he kept silence longer, even as it was now unnatural to longer give Cecil the benefit of his former doubt, that her midnight visitor was a creditor—which was the worst construction Mr. Carriscourt had dreamed of placing upon the affair.

But—the second visit, the easy, familiar parting on the side of her caller, her own quiet reception and acceptance of his light, half-endearing words—and the memory made his handsome face grow sterner and more desperate above its haggard pallor.

He bathed, and made a fresh toilet, and then went down to the breakfast-parlor, where Cecil was already before him, arranging cut flowers on the table, and he noticed the weary anxiety on her sweet face, with a pang of fierce, overwhelming yearning.

"Great God—how can I think ill of her? I will not—I will not—and yet—"

It all rushed pitifully over him again, and he could not restrain the coldness that crept into his voice as he bade her good-morning, bowing gravely as he took his seat opposite her.

The servants attended them, and Mr. Carriscourt went through the pretense of eating his egg and muffin and coffee, and reading his mail, while Cecil, as was her custom, chatted a little, and was gracious and lovely.

Then, the servants retired, and breakfast finished, Mr. Carriscourt, instead of his usual custom of ordering Cecil's ponies and phaeton and inviting her to drive him to the Marchbrook depot, walked up beside her, as she stood before a lovely vase of roses and ferns.

"Cecil, I would like you to give me an hour of your time, at home, this morning, whenever it is convenient for you."

His quiet, cold gravity struck a chill of terror to her very soul, and with a fresh thrill of dismay, he saw the look expressed on her face as she bowed.

"I am at liberty any time, Mr. Carriscourt. Will you remain here, or shall I see you in my own sitting-room?"

"Thank you—in your private room, immediately, since one hour is as convenient to you as another."

The bitterness in his tone was so plainly evident to Cecil, it seemed to her her muscles and nerves would refuse to carry her to her boudoir, so deathly weak and faint she suddenly felt—for, of course, Mr. Carriscourt must have known of her visitor the night before, or else—why this portentous sternness and displeasure?

And it was this she had dreaded so fearfully—this for which she had lived in constant fear and trembling all these weeks since her wedding day.

Silently they walked through the hall and up the stairs to Cecil's room, her heart sinking with every step, until, when she finally entered the room, she sunk down in the nearest chair, prostrated and pale.

What was about to happen? What would he say to her? Would he reproach her, scorn her, and then—spurn her from the house, from his heart, as one all unworthy to associate with him?

Great, fierce, scorching pangs seemed wrenching her heart asunder in those few minutes that she sat there in perfect silence, while Mr. Carriscourt stood leaning against the mantle, looking at the lovely pallid face, on which was so plainly written a weary despair and anguish, very greatly at variance from the confusion, and fear, and shame that would have been perfectly natural. Nor was there any bold defiance on Cecil's sweet drooped face, but a patient hopelessness that read strangely to his stern, cold eyes.

"It is better that I come straight to the gist of the matter at once. Cecil, as the man you promised to love, honor and obey, I resigned my share of the former in compliance with your request, which, at the time, I was at somewhat of a loss to comprehend. But, as your husband, and with the authority of your husband, I come to you this morning to insist that you end this mystery between us, and give me—the name of the gentleman—whom you dismissed at midnight, yesterday."

His voice was sharp with cold, bitter sternness, and it cut poor Cecil to her very soul.

She shrunk further back in her chair, and he saw the deathly pallor deepen on her face, and the agonized fluttering of her hands at his words.

Then he had seen Pemberton leave her room, and he thought—!

The sharp agony of being for an instant under his suspicion was like death to her pure, sweet pride, and yet—what else would any one have thought?

"It is part of the price I have to pay, part of my punishment," she thought, in a confused, desperate way. Then she lifted her piteous face and sorrowful, beautiful eyes in a gaze that, despite himself, went thrilling hotly to his very soul.

"Mr. Carriscourt! You look as though you thought—as though you thought—I—I—had—had—"

She faltered pitifully.

"Tell me the name of the man whom you admitted to your rooms, at midnight, your private rooms to which I am denied admittance!"

There was no use trying to prevent the determination Mr. Carriscourt showed for an answer to his pointed question, so full of stern, cold passion, and yet, with a shiver of pain. Cecil knew she could not give him his answer—the answer that would forever blast his happiness and crush him into hopeless disgrace.

"I cannot tell you, Mr. Carriscourt," she said, simply, yet with more courage in the effort than she had ever in all her life before, used.

His face darkened in a sudden wrathfulness.

"I demand your answer."

Then Cecil lifted up her head with the first defiance she had shown—but in which a great, despairing woe was strangely mingled.

"And I refuse, positively, to answer you."

Their eyes met in a look such as had never occurred before, and the anger and icy sternness and pitilessness in his face frightened her into a dumb terror—and yet—she would suffer everything rather than let him know his own position. She would die, under the withering scorn of his suspicions, rather than not spare him—this man she loved better than life.

And yet if she only might save herself in his sight! If only she might succeed in making him know the pitiful mystery was not what he—thought!

Her thoughts were taking more intelligible form of decision when his quiet, awfully passionless tones addressed her:

"Cecil, last night was the second time I saw this man leave your rooms at midnight. The first time I said nothing to you of it, thinking it might have merely been—well, that is of no consequence. But last night I heard him bid you good-night, as no man unprivileged has a right to bid you good-night. Cecil—it can mean but one thing. Do you know *what* it means?"

Her face did not flush under his cold, stern eyes, but a heart-breaking quiver trembled on her lips as she looked pleadingly, sorrowfully at him.

"Oh, yes, I know what you must think," she said, in a hopeless, touching way, "but—it is not so! As my Maker in heaven hears and judges me as I speak—I have never disgraced the name you have given me. That is as true as that I am alive and speaking to you."

His eyes suddenly darkened with sharp anguishful misery.

"Cecil, then what am I to think? For God's sake, I beg, I pray you to tell me what you mean? Give me the name of the man who *dares* come to your room."

She shook her head sorrowfully, looking straightly, steadily at him with such despairing eyes.

"I cannot tell you, I cannot explain. Oh, Mr. Carriscourt, believe me, believe me—that, although I cannot defend myself—although I dare not tell you the miserable secret that separates us—oh, for God's sake, believe me that, although I am *not* worthy of you, as I have told you before, I am as innocent of—what you think, as pure as the day I was born—oh, Mr. Carriscourt, for God's sake, believe me!"

Her voice rang out with thrilling, passionate energy, truth stamped on every syllable, and on every feature of her sweet, eager face.

"I do believe it," he answered, vehemently; "I do not think I really for a second thought differently in my very heart. But the mystery—the damning suspicion—"

"Yes, yes," she interrupted, hastily; "I know, and if you knew all, you would turn me from your door in contempt and bitter hatred! And yet, I swear before my God, I have never sullied your name, or, even in thought, sinned against you or your honor."

He stood looking at her, believing every syllable she uttered as though an angel from Heaven had visibly dictated it.

But, she confessed her unworthiness, admitted the unexplainable mystery, and his own eyes had seen and his own ears had heard!

Cecil sat, waiting for him to speak, her lovely head drooped, her hands clasped on her lap, wondering if it would be—praying it might not be, that the verdict he would give would—kill her, because it thrust her from him.

His voice was full of sharp anguish when he spoke, and hoarse with suppressed feeling.

"It is a terrible position in which you place me, Cecil. I cannot accept your declaration of unworthiness, and yet I know there is some mystery connected with you. I cannot set aside our marriage vows further than I have done; the wretched farce must continue, more wretched than ever. I must let you go on, just as you choose, carrying your secret as you please, keeping the barrier still between us—because, Cecil, I believe you, as I believe in God's angels. I deny the evidence of my own senses, the promptings of my jealous heart, and take your word—because, Cecil, you are the woman I love, the wife to whom I shall cling, in whom I shall trust to the end—whom I love to idolatry, to blind madness!"

His voice quivered with the great passion he could not restrain, and Cecil, in a swift, passionate impulse, sprung to him, and caught his hand and pressed it to her lips.

"Oh, how good you are, how good you are to me!"

"No—I am good to myself," he went on, hastily, and drawing his hand away from her, as if the unusual caress were more than he felt he could endure calmly.

"The life that is before us must be made the best of, and I once told you it would be my duty as well as highest privilege to make it as pleasant to you as possible. So," and the weariness and gravity crept back to the tones again, "if you would like, let us either accept the invitation I told you my friend Pemberton gave us, to visit him, or go for a few weeks to the seaside. The warm weather is actually on us, now, and you need the change."

She looked troubled at his kindly suggestion. She was thinking how impossible it would be for her to leave Carris Court, lest her tormentor should find her gone, on one of his visits, and in his disappointment and anger reveal himself to Mr. Carriscourt.

And Mr. Carriscourt, seeing the anxious, troubled look on her face, attributed it to another cause.

"If you fear there would be any awkwardness in our visiting, Cecil, owing to our—peculiar relations, you are at perfect liberty to substitute your own plans for mine. If you prefer to remain here, and invite guests to Carris Court—"

A look of relief flashed into her eyes, and as she suddenly comprehended his thoughts, she flushed warmly.

"Thank you. That would suit me much better. I would like you to invite your friend Mr. Pemberton and his niece to come to us for a fortnight, and I will send for Mr. May, and one or two other friends."

"Very well," he said, gravely. "We will consider that arranged. I will see Mr. Pemberton and include his nephew also in the invitation. We will entertain our guests as best we can, and perhaps can somewhat forget our personal troubles in the duties of hospitality. And there is just one other matter. Cecil."

She looked up at sound of the tender pleading in his tone as he called her name.

"I want you to promise me this one favor—you will not see that man again? You value my good opinion? You care to please me? Then promise me."

Her face kindled as she met his look.

"I would rather die than lose your good opinion, Mr. Carriscourt," she said, ardently; then the old pitiful pallor crossed her face again, as she added wearily—"but I cannot promise you. If—he comes, I must—see him. I am—obliged to—whenever he chooses."

He looked at her a second, a perfect storm of emotion in his soul.

"Very well," he said, coldly. "And I shall make it my business to see that he comes but once more."

And when he had gone, leaving Cecil alone with this new burden on her poor crushed heart, she walked up and down her room in intensest nervous excitement, her hands clasped, her streaming eyes full of woe and wretchedness, wondering where or how or when it would all end.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHO WAS SHE?

ALTHOUGH some little time had been allowed by Cuthbert Pemberton to pass by since he had made his proposal of marriage to Elma, he had not been unimproving the time.

He had been the very model of a suitor—patient, with a suppressed intensity of mingled doubt and hope that worked very favorably upon Elma, who thoroughly enjoyed this state of passionate suspense in which she supposed her lover was suffering all the pangs of the occasion.

He had once or twice made delicate allusions to the answer he wanted, and at the same time that he expressed his regret at the trying delay to him in learning his happiness or his wretchedness, he finely and daintily complimented Elma on the discretion of her judgment in weighing the matter so seriously.

Meanwhile, his other equally important affair at Carris Court was progressing perfectly to his satisfaction, and on the money Cecil had given him he was living like a lord, thereby adding silent evidence to what he had told Elma, that he was already a rich man, as well as prospective heir of the Pemberton estate.

Despite Elma's tardy resolve on the matter, she had thought of little else since Cuthbert had made his offer. She knew she had failed to make a desirable impression upon her uncle Griffith, she had learned that the money need not be left to her except at that gentleman's option, and she had been frankly told that it was his positive intention to make his grand-nephew his heir.

Everything, so far as judgment went, pointed her to accept Cuthbert's offer, and, had she had only her ambition and pride and vanity to consult, she would have landed her fish long before this.

But—there was Thorsby, and whatever influence the girl was under, it manifested itself by a look of dismay, and a feeling of mingled fear and rage whenever she thought of him.

She was thinking of him, wondering whether or not she would dare rise up in defiance, and by one bold grasp secure to herself all the golden goods the gods were proffering.

The summer day was deepening into twilight, and all the windows were open to welcome the fresh north-west breeze that stirred lazily through the rooms, swaying the lace draperies in slow, graceful motions.

Outside on the balcony, the flowers bloomed and gave forth their delicate fragrance, the awnings were drawn up, and Elma could see from her bamboo rocker across the wide avenue, and to the opaline sky above.

She was fully dressed for dinner, and sat lazily rocking and playing with her fan, her black eyes holding an unusually thoughtful look; and Miss Ogden, apparently busy with some trifle of lace crocheting, wondered, as she glanced occasionally at her, what it was that so engrossed her.

A tap on the door, answered promptly by Miss Ogden's "Enter," was followed by the entrance of Fletcher, sleek, gentlemanly as usual.

Elma looked impatiently from him to Miss Ogden, wholly ignoring his suave bow.

"How often am I to intimate that I do not want this man coming to my room?"

Fletcher's lips suddenly compressed, and a flash shot from his eyes.

"Elma!" Miss Ogden exclaimed, entreatingly, but the girl only fixed her bright eyes disdainfully on Fletcher's inscrutable face.

"Miss Pemberton finds it difficult to adapt herself to her new position, that is all, Miss Ogden. I think, under the circumstances, I can afford to overlook her little tempers. Besides, my object is a purely disinterested one in calling upon you—and before I go I think Miss Elma will admit it."

Elma looked coldly at him, but her curiosity was already somewhat aroused, and she unbended to a trifle more graciousness.

"If you have anything to say to me, say it. I will listen."

A vestige of a smile crept to Fletcher's lips at her imperious condescension, but he promptly restrained it, and took a chair at a convenient distance upon Miss Ogden's invitation.

"I came to speak of—Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton, Miss Elma. He has seen fit to honor me with his confidence, regarding the one dearest wish of his life, and although he pledged me to secrecy I feel I am better doing my duty to serve him and his interests, as I have never failed to serve the interest of his family, by speaking to you on the subject of—his attachment for you, Miss Elma."

His suave, conciliatory tone had no effect

whatever upon her. She colored angrily and met his cold eyes with a furious glance.

"You would have saved your reputation as a person to be confided in if you had kept your promise to Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton. Whatever interests him or myself can by no possibility be any business of yours."

Miss Ogden looked apprehensively at him, but his impenetrable expression gave no hint of the cut the girl's insolence had given him.

"It is merely a matter of opinion, Miss Elma," he returned, quietly. "Allow me to continue, that, so far as Mr. Cuthbert is concerned, he is well-born, well-bred, popular, handsome, and will be the richest young man of his day when his uncle dies. He will be—as he is now, in fact—a great prize, and—"

Elma tossed her head in an indifferent, half-coquettish way—the low instinct in her to herald her triumph being too strong to restrain.

"Oh, you needn't trouble yourself to enumerate his charms, or to plead his cause. He is amply able to speak for himself. He has already proposed to me."

A gleam of triumph that was actual relief and ecstatic delight gleamed in his cold, pale eyes, and he lifted his hand to his mouth to conceal a smile that parted his thin, evil lips. He had expected to find much trouble in feeling his way to the knowledge of whether Cuthbert Pemberton had asked Elma to marry him; he had prepared himself for difficulties and insults before he reached the facts; and here—he was in possession of what he desired to know almost at the outset, and because he had succeeded so well in arousing the girl's meaner nature.

Miss Ogden smiled, joyfully.

"Oh, Elma, is it possible? Mr. Cuthbert has proposed marriage! What a splendid prospect lies before you as his wife. My dear, I heartily congratulate you!"

Elma laughed, carelessly.

"Don't go into theatricals, Miss Ogden, and pray don't make a laughing-stock of yourself, because I haven't accepted Cuthbert Pemberton, yet."

"But you will, Miss Elma?"

Fletcher spoke the few words with a quiet intimation that infuriated the girl, all accustomed as she was to utterly ignore the slightest innovation on her liberty of opinion.

"What do you mean by speaking to me like that—and you a hired servant in this house of which I shall one day be mistress, whether or no? Remember your place, and keep your advice until you are asked for it."

She was thoroughly angry, and in proportion to her anger and impudence, Miss Ogden became nervous and frightened.

"Elma, Elma, you must not speak so to Mr. Fletcher—indeed you must not! He is a good friend to you, and if you—"

"I will not listen to another word! I tell you I will not be dictated to by either of you. You are both hired servants, and I will have you discharged if you repeat the offense. Do you understand me?"

Her eyes were flashing like ebony fires, and unrestrained passion was written on every feature of her face. Miss Ogden had put her handkerchief to her eyes and was trembling with dismay; and Fletcher, with his impassive face, and cold, inscrutable eyes, suddenly arose from his chair and walked over to the door and turned the key in the lock, and then returned and took up a position, standing, directly in front of Elma, who, through sheer astonishment at his peculiar, deliberate manner, was hushed into a strange expectancy.

"Miss Elma"—and there was something in the tones of his low, quiet voice that was terrible to hear—"Miss Elma, we will have no more playing at cross-purposes. You will accept Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton's offer of marriage, and you will accept it inside of twenty-four hours."

Miss Ogden fairly held her breath at sound of the low-spoken, authoritative words, while Elma looked at him, nearly speechless with fury and astonishment.

"You—insolent—"

She did not proceed any further in her breathless defiance of retort, for Fletcher coolly interrupted her, a slow, wily smile creeping to his mouth.

"You will do exactly as I say, Miss Elma. You may spare yourself a great deal that will be unpleasant if you quietly obey me. Otherwise—"

She sprung wildly to her feet.

"Obey you! obey you!"

She would have screamed the words in her ungovernable rage had not a look from Fletcher's eyes actually frightened her.

"Be sensible, and listen to what I intend you shall hear, and, as I said, and repeat—obey. You have made a slight mistake in defying me, young lady. I hoped and intended to be your friend and adviser, but since you refuse to accept me as such, I shall institute myself your master, and as such, fully intend to be obeyed."

"Oh—you horrible—creature! I will tell—"

He interrupted her gasping, vindictive words again, even more imperiously than before.

"Hush! Not another syllable. You will not tell any one a word of what has passed in this room, and, you will accept Cuthbert Pemberton for your husband, not only because you are not to be Mr. Pemberton's heiress, and Cuthbert is to be, but, because—"

He hesitated, and cast a grim, penetrating look at Miss Ogden, whose handkerchief had dropped from her pale, alarmed face. She answered him with a look of consternation.

"I am sure Elma will think better of it, and agree to accept Mr. Cuthbert," she said, almost tremblingly, and Elma's lip curled scornfully.

"I will never—never be forced into marrying anybody, and neither one of you can make me consent!"

"Very well, then. I find I am compelled to tell you something I never intended you should know—something that, unless I am greatly mistaken in my estimate of you, will change your opinion in regard to marrying a man of wealth and position."

"Listen. Unless you marry your suitor, all hope for you is over, for—if Mr. Griffith Pemberton knew what I know, and what Miss Ogden knows, he would drive you out of this house within an hour. You are not his sister's child, you are not his niece!"

For once in her life, the girl was completely taken aback. Her eyes looked from his terrible, stern face to Miss Ogden's pale, affrighted one.

"I—I—don't know what you mean," she stammered.

"No, you don't know what I mean, and in all human probability you never will know the secret we two have carried many years and will carry to the end of our lives. You never will know, but—you will obey implicitly. You understand me?"

There was no possibility of misdoubting him. The awful truth was written too plainly on his grim face, in his firm, resolute words, his quiet, compelling manner that carried positive conviction with it.

She felt a deathly sinking of her courage, her ever ready fearlessness and defiance; she grew cold and quaking in every limb.

"I cannot—seem—to—grasp it. I—I—am—not able to say—anything now—"

He smiled, satisfiedly.

"It is not necessary that you say anything. The proofs I might give you of the truth of my assertion are absolutely undeniable, irrefragable. You will do well to quietly accept my statement, and—without further delay, accept the offer of marriage under consideration."

He withdrew, and by the time dinner was announced Elma had removed all outward traces of her emotion, and went down to the table, in almost her usual manner.

CHAPTER XXII.

INTO THE NET, OR OUT OF IT.

DINNER was over in the Pemberton mansion, and Elma and Mr. Griffith Pemberton adjourned to the brilliantly-lighted parlors, where, shortly afterward, Cuthbert joined them, and still later, Miss Ogden.

It was the first time for a couple of days that Cuthbert had called at the house, and Mr. Pemberton's face lighted gladly at sight of him.

"You have been quite deserting us, lately, my dear boy, but I am pleased to see you. It begins to feel like getting away to the seaside, and I was just about to tell Elma my plans for the summer, but now that you have come, suppose you and she arrange what would suit you best."

An unusually gentle mood was upon Mr. Pemberton that evening. He had observed a subdued quiet in Elma's manner, during dinner, that pleased him, and he was ready and glad to accept it as a sign that she would and could change her manner and characteristics. And it was just like him to go fully half-way toward accomplishing such a desirable end—consequently he had devoted himself particularly to Elma, and yet, with a strange inconsistency for which he chided himself, he could not help feeling a sense of relief when his nephew came in to relieve him.

Cuthbert shook hands with him, and then advanced to Elma, whose eyes kindled at sight of him. He took her hand, retaining it a second

in a meaning pressure, and then, dropping it, took a seat near by.

At Mr. Pemberton's request, Elma played for them, in her usual brilliant style, and Cuthbert leaned comfortably back in his chair, watching her, and thinking what a glorious stroke of fortune he would accomplish in marrying this girl and securing all that she represented.

She was looking extremely handsome this evening, her toilet being a light summer silk of a peculiar shade of amethyst that set off her black eyes and yellow hair to perfection. Her face was less saucy and independent in expression than usual, and a grave, half-puzzled thoughtfulness in her eyes mellowed their darkness most agreeably.

After she had ably executed a Chopin's polonaise, she requested Cuthbert to sing, which he did, accompanying himself in a beautiful little aria from "Mignon," that showed the pleasant quality and admirable cultivation of his tenor voice.

Mr. Pemberton and Miss Ogden conversed quietly, listening between times to the young people, and then, Mr. Pemberton excused himself, as was his usual custom, and retired to his library.

Miss Ogden drew a low satin easy-chair to the rear balcony and stepped out, to enjoy the lovely evening, she would have said, but really to give Cuthbert Pemberton the opportunity to renew his proposal.

The music over, the two young people sauntered over to the front balcony, that lay all in shadow, and as they stood there a moment, Cuthbert seized his opportunity—for it was with this express purpose in view he had come to Elma.

"You must know it is cruel to keep me in suspense any longer, Elma," he said, taking up the pretty plump hand whose rings sparkled in the light, and caressing it gently. "Nearly two weeks ago I laid my heart and hand and name and prospects at your feet, and you promised to consider my suit. Elma, my darling, you must answer me to-night. I am in a state of uncertainty that renders me unfit for business or pleasure. I can think of nothing but you and my love for you, night or day. I am in a perpetual state of torment lest I shall lose you, the only woman in the world I ever loved. Elma—you must settle this now. My dearest, you will give yourself to me? You will be my wife?"

His apparently perfectly truthful words were such an admirable forgery of the genuine passion of which he did not feel a spark, that Elma was pleased and flattered anew, and yet, her inherent unrefinement of nature made it impossible for her to take her cue from him and answer in equally elegant manner.

"Of course you are in doubt and uncertainty, cousin Cuthbert, and it was my intention you should be. Anybody that wants me has got to be pretty sure of it, I can tell you—and judging from appearances, you want me very much."

He involuntarily shrunk from her, despite her beauty and her golden worth.

"Yes, I do want you more than I ever wanted anything before," he said, hiding his feelings beneath a smile. "Who could help wanting you, so lovely, and attractive, and guileless as you are? I have always said and thought that the girl I married must be one whose lips had never been kissed by a lover until I kissed them, that to me should be given the maiden love of her girlish heart. Such a girl I know you to be, Elma."

She smiled again, a curious little gleam in her black eyes.

"Of course I never had a lover before, Cuthbert, and that is one reason why I have hesitated to accept the first offer I have received. I believe I shall have many good chances if I wait a little while."

"I have no doubt but that you will be able to boast of offers by the score before the season is over," he said, gravely, "but, will they be desirable as mine? First, no one will ever love you so well as I do. Second, no marriage would be such a family convenience as one between us. And—you force me to say it—there is not another man in New York city with the prospective fortune I can promise you. Your uncle Griffith, whose sole heir I am, is one of the richest men in America."

She listened attentively, endorsing his specious reasoning, and thinking that she had played with her fish long enough.

It was a singular complication of affairs that existed between them. He, knowing he was not Griffith Pemberton's heir, and believing honestly that she would be, was urged by every possible motive of self-interest to secure

her in marriage, regardless of the fact that he entertained not the slightest affection for her; while Elma, knowing the insecurity of her position, believing implicitly what Fletcher had assured her, yet not knowing more than that, was forced to accept him as her husband, both by stress of circumstances and the influence of a man she had begun to fear as well as hate.

And, in the direct face of another fate which she knew perfectly well might any minute present itself to her.

Cuthbert broke in upon the brief silence with his voice of well-simulated eager passion:

"Answer me, my darling! It will be yes—it must be yes!" he added, as he passed his arm around her waist, and attempted to draw her closer to him.

"I suppose it must be," she said, half-reluctantly, yet with a certain coquettish graciousness in her voice. "But—yes—you may kiss me, of course; only once, though, for I don't care about kissing, Cuthbert. And I do hate having my laces all disarranged and rumped."

She withdrew from his arms, and smoothed the delicate disse ruching which her lover's arm had slightly mussed. He bit his lip, but refrained from any further demonstration.

"Your wishes shall always be my law, my dearest," he said, gallantly. "And now I will go at once to Mr. Pemberton and announce our betrothal, and you can tell your friend, Miss Ogden. We will arrange for a speedy wedding, Elma, and a bridal tour to the seaside and mountains. You shall be the happiest woman the sun shines on, my dearest. And you have already made me the proudest, happiest man in the world."

"That is all nonsense, Cuthbert," she returned, coolly. "Of course I am very glad to marry you because you are rich and handsome and all that, and I dare say I shall like you very well. But there's one thing—I don't believe the old gentleman will consent to our marriage. He hasn't the most obliging way in the world, and he doesn't care much more for me than I for him, and if he thinks it would be a satisfaction to me to marry you, or any one, he would decline his consent for pure spite."

Cuthbert smiled at the venom in her tones.

"Then we will marry without his consent, my dearest. Do you think I would be cheated of my beautiful bride by him, or any one?"

"Well," she assented, graciously, thinking what a terrible thing for her it would be if by any means the marriage were prevented, "I will leave it to you, Cuthbert. And I'll go tell Miss Ogden now, while you see the griffin."

He lifted her hand to his lips for a good-night, and went to the library to seek Mr. Pemberton, while Elma stepped out upon the balcony where she aroused Miss Ogden from a little half-sleepy reverie.

"I have promised to marry him," Elma announced, abruptly, as she seated herself on another chair near by.

Miss Ogden was instantly all eager attention.

"My dear Elma, I congratulate you with all my heart. Your prospect is glorious. There is not a girl in all New York but will envy you. You will be rich and popular and admired wherever you go, for, to you, marriage means emancipation and freedom and independence! My dear Elma, when I think of what you may have saved yourself from, I tremble."

Elma sat, her eyes dropped to the rug on the floor of the balcony, a dreamy, far-away look in them very unusual to her to indulge.

"Yes, I suppose, you do," she said, presently.

"I never was so staggered and put about in all my life as when that beastly Fletcher told me I was not the genuine heiress—not Mr. Pemberton's niece as I have been led to suppose for years. But I shall make myself secure by marrying Cuthbert. I will secure a position second to none, and be, after all, just the same as though I really were his sister's child. Miss Ogden"—and the black eyes suddenly lost their thoughtful look, and flashed keen and sharp on that lady's face—"it is only just and right that I know who and what I am. And I want you to tell me."

Miss Ogden compressed her lips in pale determination.

"That I am not at liberty to tell. I am sworn to secrecy, Elma."

The girl's lips curled in an angry sneer.

"Much you respect the sacredness of an oath, when you deliberately swore to Mr. Pemberton I was his sister's child! Well, then—don't tell me! I don't know that I need care to learn who my parents were, since it will not interfere with my becoming Mrs. Cuthbert Pemberton. But one thing I can assure you," and her voice grew full of bitter hatred and cold fury, "and that is

—when once I am married, and mistress of this house, that you and that insufferable wretch of a Fletcher shall be discharged from the Pemberton service and take your miserable secret off with you. You need to be taught a lesson for your insolent familiarity with me."

And she went up-stairs to her rooms, leaving Miss Ogden to sit crying in the starlight—genuine, pitiful tears that were wrung from her very heart.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A MAN TO BE WATCHED.

CUTHBERT PEMBERTON did not go to the library where he would have seen Mr. Griffith Pemberton, and as he told Elma he intended to do, but, instead, went directly to the small room at the top of the house set apart for Hiram Fletcher's special use, and where, as usual, that individual was found, not leisurely busy over accounts, and pleasantly engrossed in papers appertaining to the intricacies of the Pemberton affairs, but in the very mood Cuthbert was most desirous of finding him.

He evidently was not surprised when Cuthbert rapped and entered.

A brief, inscrutable smile sped across his thin lips, and he quietly and deliberately arose and locked the door.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Cuthbert, and you are not entirely unexpected. From little charming suggestions Miss Elma let fall I was sure you would be here to tell me the success of your wooing. So I locked the door to insure secrecy."

He returned to his chair, settled himself comfortably, and with a slow, calm smile on his face very much at variance with the true feelings at his heart, he waited while Cuthbert took two or three restless strides across the room.

Several minutes passed, and Cuthbert continued his silent, impatient walk, watched narrowly by Fletcher's cold, shrewd glance.

"Perhaps I am mistaken in the object of your visit, Mr. Cuthbert," he said, at last, his eager curiosity at fever heat to know if Elma had obeyed his orders.

"You are not mistaken," Cuthbert said, throwing himself in an easy-chair. "You are not mistaken. I have repeated my proposal of marriage to my cousin, and she has accepted it."

Not a shade of more satisfaction than was just the thing, was permitted to show itself on Fletcher's face at the news that made his wicked heart triumphant and elated. His voice was quiet and respectful, and just enthusiastic enough to suit the occasion as he replied:

"I congratulate you, Mr. Cuthbert. Your cousin is a beautiful, accomplished girl, fit to mate with the best in the land, and perfectly calculated to make you a very proud and happy man."

Cuthbert's lips curled over so slightly.

"I doubt it, Fletcher. The truth is, and you are a man of sufficient perception to know it, that so far as love is concerned, there's not much lost between us. I shall marry her for her money, and when once she is safely my wife, she may go to the—dickens for all I care. I don't like her, Fletcher. She's pretty, after a bold, pronounced fashion, and several fellows are smitten with her dash and—questionable vivacity. She has the temper of the Old Boy himself, and is mercenary and heartless. All the same—she and I are engaged to be married."

His voice held a sneer in its low, passionless tones that had the effect of making Fletcher's impassive face slowly redden.

"You are not over-complimentary to your future wife, Mr. Cuthbert. Unless you think you can make the young lady a good husband, take my advice, and retract your words. Some consideration is certainly due her from you."

There was evident restraint in his words, and certainly a cold reproach in his manner, and it made Cuthbert laugh lightly.

"You are unnatural in your rôle of virtuous sentiment, Fletcher. Allow me to say that, if she were the devil, even, I'd marry her to secure the fortune from which she has ousted me. To change the subject: I have every reason to believe the old gentleman will oppose the match. He has spoken to me indefinitely on the subject several times of late, and each time he seems more and more determined that Elma shall not receive any marked attentions for a year or so yet. Before she came, it was his earnest desire that, if agreeable, a marriage should take place in course of time, but his views have undergone a change—evidently his opinion of, and affection for his niece have not been strengthened upon acquaintance."

Fletcher's pale eyes looked intently at a gay druggist at his feet.

"And yet, she is his niece," he repeated, thoughtfully, slowly.

"Oh, yes; and as such he is Quixotic enough to do his whole duty by her, regardless of his personal feeling in the matter."

"But, you are convinced he will refuse to sanction an immediate marriage—and in the event of a long engagement, Miss Pemberton may lose her heart to some one else."

"Exactly. And I have come to hear your advice on the subject."

Fletcher's eyebrows drew themselves in a thoughtful, half-puzzled frown, and he sat several minutes as if in deep consideration of the subject, pro and con.

"Well," Cuthbert said, after a time, impatiently.

"I see but one way," Fletcher replied, deliberately. "There really is but one way to see. You fully intend to marry Miss Pemberton, your uncle as fully intends she shall not marry—yet. You are resolved not to wait—with the natural impatience of a lover. From my knowledge of Miss Pemberton, she has a vein of romance and adventure in her temperament that would render the only available alternative easy. Marry her quietly—secretly, if you will."

He sat with his legs easily crossed, speaking in a quiet matter-of-fact tone that admirably masked his well-restrained eagerness.

"I'll do it! Elma will not be averse to such an irregular proceeding, as you say. I'll marry her inside of forty-eight hours, and then—but, Fletcher," and his face suddenly darkened—"what could the old gentleman do about the money in case he was hopelessly angry with us?"

Fletcher smiled briefly, and recrossed his legs, leaning his head against the back of the chair, and resting his arms on the sides.

"Being entirely in your uncle's confidence, Mr. Cuthbert, and knowing just the sort of man he is in temperament and principles, I am certainly justified in assuring you that you take no risk whatever in marrying Miss Pemberton out of hand. Frankly, as you may have seen, I am interested in this affair, on your account. When I first became aware of Mr. Pemberton's intention to make his niece his principal legatee I felt naturally sorry that your long-expected prospects were so materially changed. A marriage with Miss Pemberton suggested itself to me from the very first, and now, I advise you to secure both fortune and a beautiful wife as soon as expedient. Mr. Pemberton will doubtless be angry at your disregard for his wishes, but—you can safely leave the management of that part of the affair to me. Marry her—and my word for it, it will be all right."

Cuthbert knit his brows with a sarcastic smile.

"You are an enthusiast on the subject, Fletcher. Do you know you impress me strongly with the same sensation I experienced when you first spoke to me of Miss Pemberton? That you have some hidden motive at stake—that you are anxious to serve your own ends, so eager are you to bring about this marriage."

Fletcher listened patiently, not a muscle of his inscrutable face betraying how marvelously near the thrust had come. Then he smiled coolly.

"I will admit I have a motive—an object to gain. If the heiress marries you, you will be master here, as your grand-uncle before you. If she marries a stranger, that stranger will be master. In the first instance the probability is very strong that you will desire to continue me in charge of the affairs I have managed so long. I make considerable money by it; I have no desire to surrender my position. If a stranger comes—"

He shrugged his shoulders suggestively.

Cuthbert laughed.

"A fair, honest defense. Yes, Fletcher, I'll follow your advice, and marry my fair cousin off-hand, relying upon you implicitly to arrange the finale of the affair—the forgiveness and reconciliation, you know. And, in turn, I'll agree that so long as you wish you shall retain your present position."

"Thank you, sir," he returned, and then these two men, each fighting desperately for their own interest, parted, and Cuthbert was letting himself out of the grand entrance, just as Mr. Pemberton stepped to the door of his library and called him.

"This way, one minute, before you go, Cuthbert. To-night's mail has just brought me a line from my young friend Carriscourt, who, with his wife, will call on my niece to-morrow and remain for luncheon. Drop in and see Mrs. Carriscourt. You consider yourself a connoisseur in beautiful woman, and they say she is exquisitely lovely."

A sudden cold chill struck him. Cecil coming here, under the very roof of the house he frequented! And he—invited to meet her!

The sarcasm of the fatefulness of it occurred to him with keen force, as he instantly saw there could be no awkward *contretemps* happen since Mr. Pemberton so unconsciously warned him. But, a chill like ice dripping on him shivered over him at the narrow escape. Suppose Mr. Pemberton had failed to notify him?

But, Satan doesn't often desert his own, until he gets them just where he wants them, and Cuthbert remembered that fact with a little triumphant thanksgiving.

"You are very kind; thanks!" he said. "I will do my best to drop in at luncheon and see your guest; indeed, I will be quite disappointed if the engagement I have with Lexington keeps me from seeing the lady I have heard is so charming."

He waited a moment longer, undecided whether or not to broach the subject of his engagement with Elma; then a visitor was announced, and he bade Mr. Pemberton good-night—not going directly from the house, but stepping into the parlor and deliberately removing from a magnificently lambrequined bracket a photograph of himself in its crimson velvet and ebony *passe-partout* frame.

He transferred it bodily to his pocket, with a smile on his face.

"The only likeness of me in the house, thanks be to my presiding angel! And the solitary one of Sydney's was condemned to disgrace and the ash-heap many a long day ago. So, come to lunch, my fair Cecil, and surprise the old gentleman by his recognition of the face at the window, and I think Lexington will detain me beyond the luncheon hour."

Then he went away, and the silence of the late evening settled down on the quiet upper streets of the city. Mr. Pemberton dismissed his visitor a little later, and a servant went about putting out the lights, and greater silence and darkness reigned as the solemn midnight approached.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SWEET FACE AGAIN.

THE clear, bright summer morning was drawing near to noon, and Mr. Griffith Pemberton's Fifth avenue residence looked inviting and cool with its gay fluttering awnings and balconies of rare plants, and its lace draperies swaying in the fresh westerly breeze, as the carriage containing Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil drove up from the depot.

Cecil had a beautiful, unostentatious toilet of gray summer silk, that answered equally well for the short journey on the train between Carriscourt and the city, and the luncheon to which she had come at Mr. Pemberton's house.

She looked very lovely and ladylike, and Mr. Carriscourt felt a thrill of pride and delight as he was warmly met and welcomed almost at the door by his host, who could not conceal his look of admiration and expression of astonishment at sight of Cecil's fair sweet face.

He shook her hand warmly, and, with a sudden, tender impulse, bowed his handsome gray head and kissed her brow.

"You will not chide me, my dear Mrs. Carriscourt, for such a liberty. But, besides knowing your husband so many years, and having enjoyed a slight acquaintance with the late Judge May, you remind me of a face I saw once—not so long ago, the sweetest face I ever saw—at a window on Lexington avenue."

Carriscourt looked at Cecil, and then at Mr. Pemberton, and was just a little surprised to notice traces of intensest interest on both their faces.

"It was I you saw, Mr. Pemberton; I never shall forget it so long as I live. You drove by with a gentleman and looked up at my window, and it seemed to me that I had always known you."

Mr. Pemberton still was looking steadily at her sweet pure face, with the everlasting shadows in the blue eyes, the gravity around the exquisite mouth, the warm sunshiny glory of the lustrous rippling hair, and as he looked a strange expression gathered slowly in his eyes, and his grand face became so pallid that it was evident some strong emotion had come to him.

"Yes; it is the same face that attracted me so strongly and strangely, because—because—you recall a dear one long lost. Mrs. Carriscourt, you will pardon this mystery of manner, dear child. Carriscourt, come; bring your wife into the morning-room, and I will send a maid to show her to a room for any refreshing she may wish to make in her toilet."

But his voice was husky and his manner full of a suppressed agitation that could not fail to command Carriscourt's attention.

They remained in the elegant little morning-room until a servant came to escort Cecil upstairs, and as she went, Mr. Pemberton took her hand again, in a tender, wistful way.

"Let me tell you I am so glad you have come, my dear. I want you to see my niece, and use all your influence to make her like yourself, if it be possible. We will serve luncheon at one o'clock."

Cecil smiled back in the splendid, troubled eyes that had such a puzzled, yearning look in them, and then followed the maid from the room, while Mr. Pemberton turned to Carriscourt.

"Do you wonder what is the matter with me?" he asked, half-smilingly, but with a pale anxiety on his face. "Your lovely wife has captivated my old heart, my dear boy. She brings up memories that almost unman me, and arouses a strange, sickening fear and doubt that appall me. Sit down here a moment and let me ask you some questions—or no," he suddenly said. "I will not allow such an emotion to get the victory over me. It was only a thought, a passing thought, born of a sudden, yearning wish that my niece were just such a woman. We won't speak of it, Carriscourt. Resemblances are sometimes a little startling, you know, but there are a thousand cases where they mean nothing."

Mr. Carriscourt listened, and looked almost as puzzled as Mr. Pemberton had done. But the strange, brief agitation had gone from his face now, followed by its habitual expression, with perhaps a little deepened pallor.

"Resemblances are startling, as you say, sir. Allow me to ask, does Cecil remind you so strangely of some one? It will be a great pleasure to her to know she has any such recommendation to your favor."

"Yes, she is very like—my dead sister. You have doubtless heard the story, Carriscourt, how my poor Genevieve married—a villain, and died shortly after her babe was born—the young girl up-stairs, for whom I searched for years and years, and found so very lately through the unceasing, intelligent care of my man, Fletcher."

"I have heard, sir, something of the story. And I congratulate you on having been so successful. I have heard that Miss Pemberton is remarkably beautiful, and an honor and a pride to you."

Mr. Pemberton's face darkened.

"She is handsome—if you admire that style of beauty. But, Carriscourt, Elma is not as I hoped she would be—like her mother. She is—she must be her father over again. And I hated that man with a hatred so bitter that I do not forgive him to-day as he lies in his grave. He ruined my sister's happiness. He killed her by his treatment, and although he has lain in his grave for long years, my curse lies heavily upon him."

Mr. Pemberton's blue eyes were dark with the pain of bitter memories.

"But—for the young wife's sake, sir, you have done your whole duty by the child."

"I don't know," Mr. Pemberton returned, almost fiercely. "For my dead Genevieve's sake I left no stone unturned to find the girl, hoping and praying it would be another Genevieve, noble, generous, loving, spirited, sweet—but—she is all her villainous father over again, high-tempered, headstrong—Carriscourt, don't let's speak further of it. It is ungenerous in me to prejudice you against my niece. Perhaps I am soured and bittered till I fail to see her good qualities. Try to make your lovely wife take an interest in her, and make her as nearly like herself as she can, for she is just what I had dared to think Genevieve's child would be."

Their communication was cut suddenly short by the sound of footsteps approaching from the upper floor, and in a moment, Elma Pemberton, in full house toilette of amethyst-colored silk, came sweeping into the room.

The gentlemen arose, and Mr. Pemberton presented her to Mr. Carriscourt.

She bowed, and smiled and extended her hand in a pretty coquettish welcome.

"I have heard so very much of you from uncle Griffith," she said, graciously, and Mr. Carriscourt bowed in acceptance of the implied compliment.

"Both myself and Mrs. Carriscourt hope to have the pleasure of continuing any good impressions you may have received of us. Mr. Pemberton has accepted an invitation to visit at Carriscourt, and I think I can safely promise him and yourself and Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton a pleasant occasion."

"Oh, thanks," she returned, in a prompt, flip-pant way that instantly jarred on Carriscourt's sensitive taste—"I should love to visit at Carriscourt if it does not interfere with our arrangement to be at Long Branch by the first of July. We might come a little later in the season, after we return from the sea-shore."

A swift displeasure gathered in Mr. Pemberton's eyes that Carriscourt saw he vainly endeavored to hide.

"We will accept Mr. Carriscourt's kind invitation for the date mentioned, Elma. We can visit Long Branch later just as conveniently."

A mutinous look came over her face.

"But I prefer to go to the country later. I have decided to go to the sea-shore on the first of July, and—I am going. I am sure Mr. Carriscourt will accept my reason."

She sent her most bewitching smiles to Carriscourt, who bowed, gravely. He was thinking how strangely at variance with the birth and natural breeding of a Pemberton this little, coarse passage-at-arms was.

"Elma, I cannot permit such—discourtesy," he added, in a cold, angry way. "If you are not able to appreciate the indelicacy of your refusal, I am at the necessity of suggesting to you that such is the case. Carriscourt, here is an intaglio I purchased yesterday. I wish you would look at it and give me your candid opinion. Elma"—and he turned to her again, meeting her unreasoning fury of eyes and manner—"you will be kind enough to remain here until Mrs. Carriscourt comes down."

He and Mr. Carriscourt went into the library together, leaving Elma alone with her ruffled feelings.

"I will not be imposed upon another day," she said, hotly, to herself. "Uncle Griffith treats me as if I were a child in pinafores, dictating to me as no living person shall do. I will go to Long Branch by the first of July, and if I don't choose to go to the horrid, poky old country I won't go at all, either."

She took a letter from her pocket, and settled herself comfortably in a luxurious chair to read it, with a curious, inscrutable look on her face as for the dozenth time she read it. It was not long, but very decidedly to the point, and it was written in a bold, handsome hand, and it was postmarked London.

And it read:

"MY DEAREST ELMA: This makes the fifth letter I have written you since you went to America, and failing to receive a word from you, I have made up my mind to follow you and learn what is the matter. I cannot—I will not—believe you have made up your mind to cut me dead, nor do I think you have any intention of trying to get out of our engagement, which, taking into account our undoubted love for each other, and the fact of so many letters, proving the engagement, being in my possession, would be a very hard task for you to accomplish."

"I must see you. I shall sail in the steamer next after the one that takes this letter. I will be at your fashionable watering-place, Long Branch, from the first to the fifteenth of July—and you must be there. I am all impatience to see you, to congratulate you on the great good-fortune that came to you, and also, my dear Elma, to claim the fulfillment of your promise to be my wife. Ever devotedly,"

She had read the ominous letter so many times that she did not shrink in fear as at the first reading, but a vague dismay showed on her face.

"Poor Thorsby! I wonder how I will get out of it! I liked him pretty well, but—I wouldn't marry him for all the world. I will have to go to Long Branch and manage him as well as I can, until—I am safely married to Cuthbert, and then—nothing can undo that."

A defiant look settled around her mouth, as, hearing the soft rustle of silken skirts and footsteps descending the stairs, she thrust the letter in her pocket, and arose to meet Cecil Carriscourt.

CHAPTER XXV.

BLACK EYES AND BLUE.

THE two women, both scarcely more than girls, approached each other, just as the gentlemen reentered the room.

Mr. Pemberton stepped forward, his eyes looking eagerly from the one fair face, with its exquisite, velvety blue eyes, to the other, with its bold, handsome black ones, and the same look of wistfulness flashed over his face Cecil had seen before, followed by a bitterness.

"This is my niece, Elma, Mrs. Carriscourt. Elma, I have greatly desired you to become acquainted with this lady and her husband."

Elma bowed and Cecil extended her hand in her sweet, gracious way.

"I am so glad to meet you, Miss Pemberton. I have heard much of you, and I sincerely hope we may be friends."

Her voice never had sounded so pure, so cultured as in the immediate contrast with Elma's flippant answer.

"There's not the least doubt of it, Mrs. Carriscourt, if you are at all easy to get along with. I am pleased to see you—shall I show you some of the beauties of my new home while we are awaiting lunch?"

Cecil accepted the courtesy, and they left the room together, Elma's silken train sweeping ostentatiously along, her jewels glittering, her French heels clinking along the marble floor of the grand hall, and Cecil, in her modest, pretty, quiet toilet, and spotless laces, her slight, perfect figure, her graceful, springy walk.

As they disappeared, Mr. Pemberton sighed.

"What a contrast! Clyde, do you wonder I am disappointed? There's just enough of the Pemberton strain in her blood to give her her beautiful hair and complexion, but, aside from that, she is her father's child. Why is it that such a heartsick disappointment has come to me in my old age? Why couldn't she have been like your wife, with her soulful, truthful face and refined, dainty ways—just like my sister was at her best?"

His grand blue eyes were full of gloomy shadows as he listened to the sound of Cecil's voice, coming almost indistinctly from the room whither Elma had escorted her.

"I cannot account for my interest in your wife," he went on, hurriedly, "but she impresses me in the most inexplicable manner. She stirs my old heart so strangely that if I did not know she was the child of a family whose name stands high in social circles, I should seriously ask myself whether or not there could have been, by any fatal possibility, a mistake on Fletcher's part. And yet there could not be—of course there could not have been. Every atom of proof was subjected to the strongest investigation; but how my declining years might have been cheered and comforted if Fate had only ordered otherwise."

Carriscourt sat back in his chair, a sudden, inexplicable sensation taking possession of him, that quickened the beat of his heart, and stirred his pulses strangely.

If Cecil were not the daughter of the Mays, Mr. Pemberton had said.

And Mr. Carriscourt knew she was not a May. Then—

Only for one moment did that curious, confused emotion master him.

"It is a rather far-fetched supposition," he assured himself, quietly. "Nevertheless I will investigate it at my leisure, and in the meantime there is no necessity for my mentioning anything to Mr. Pemberton."

Nothing further was said on the subject between them, and, the while, Elma and Cecil were having a little womanly gossip in Elma's rooms above.

"Everything is very lovely," Cecil had said, as she entered the charming apartments.

"Oh, yes, and it ought to be, I am sure. Uncle Griffith is immensely rich, and as I am to be his heiress, it is proper that he should have everything to suit me. But he is a horrid proud, cross old fellow."

Cecil did not permit herself to look the surprise she felt.

"He does not seem cross," she returned, gently. "To me he is the embodiment of all that is best and greatest in manhood."

"That's because you don't know him as well as I do," Elma retorted, in a confidential way. "When I first saw him I thought just as you do, but now—"

She shrugged her shoulders, prettily.

"I should think you would love him dearly for all his kindness to you, at least," Cecil said, gravely, kindly.

"Well, I don't. I can't see what great kindness he has shown. He suited and pleased himself in finding me, and as I am his own sister's child, he is obliged to make a great deal of me. But, I can tell you one thing, Mrs. Carriscourt, if he wasn't so immensely rich, I shouldn't stay under his roof an hour longer, so cold and cross and tyrannical he is. As it is, I expect to be mistress of my own house before long."

She smiled and twirled her fan coquettishly, and Cecil could not restrain a little amused smile at her vain ostentation—the first smile of amusement that had curved her sweet mouth for many a day.

"What a delightful mystery, Miss Pemberton. And yet, it seems hardly a mystery, because you can hardly mean but one emancipation."

Elma laughed lightly, tapping her tiny slippered foot on the floor.

"Yes—you know what I mean, I see, Mrs.

Carriscourt. My cousin, Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton—you have heard of him—and I are betrothed, and after we are married we will see who reigns here."

She compressed her thin lips resolutely, and her black eyes flashed a pretty defiance.

Cecil delicately ignored her last clause.

"I have heard of Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton—and I most sincerely hope that I can conscientiously congratulate you. Tell me all about him—he is handsome, and elegant, and *déroté*, of course."

Her charming little manner flattered Elma greatly.

"Oh! Handsome!—I should think so. He is tall and dark, and has the loveliest curly hair, and whiskers, and black eyes."

A little sickening memory swept over Cecil at the words of the description. Tall, dark, curling black hair, luxuriant black whiskers—it was so like Sydney Valence that a deathly faintness swept swiftly over her.

In a second the sensation was over.

"I am so nervous and childish," she told herself, energetically. "Am I never to lose my fear and repugnance to tall, dark, well-bearded men, because such a one is the blight of my life?"

Elma, chattering volubly on, had not observed the fleeting agitation on her guest's fair face.

"I will admit another thing, however, about my future lord and master, Mrs. Carriscourt, and that is: I don't care very much for him, for all his good looks and distinguished manners."

Cecil looked gravely reproachful.

"You would not seriously think of marrying where you could give no affection? Oh, surely, Miss Pemberton, you are not in earnest?"

"Oh, but I am! I know somebody else—I—I expect you will be horrified—but it's true that I like somebody else ever so much better; but I won't marry him, and I certainly shall marry Cuthbert."

Cecil experienced a sense of pitying repugnance toward this girl who was so unrefinedly blunt in her language and manner, and so deficient in delicate, womanly principles.

"You surely do not realize what a terrible thing it is for a young girl to give herself in marriage to a man she does not entirely respect and love. It—"

Elma interrupted her, a bold little smile on her red lips.

"How do you know that, Mrs. Carriscourt? Don't you love your husband?"

A flush of sensitive pride and outraged delicacy mounted Cecil's pure face.

"Miss Pemberton, if you were more intimately acquainted with my husband you would understand the utter absurdity of your question. No woman could be his wife and not love him. What I wished to impress upon you was how wretchedly such marriages as yours must be, always end."

"I cannot see where the wretchedness will be. We will have plenty of money, and go where we please. I shall have all the dresses and jewels I want, and shall do exactly what I please, independent of him. He can do just as he chooses, regardless of me. We will get along very well, and—best of all—it will spite uncle Griffith so."

A sternness was gathering on Cecil's face. She felt it was impossible for her to listen longer to Elma's remarks, and yet, she hardly knew how to change the subject. As it was, she did the best she could.

"I suppose Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton will be here to luncheon? I would like to see him very much."

"I expect he will," Elma replied, carelessly. "And you will also have the felicity of meeting the hateful old maid in Christendom—my special aversion, my duenna, Miss Ogden."

"The lady who has been your friend since your mother died, I presume you mean," Cecil replied, in a quiet, cold reproach which utterly failed of its impression on Elma, for at that instant a servant tapped on the door and announced that luncheon was served, and the ladies went down to a repast which did credit to Mr. Pemberton's French *chef de cuisine*.

An hour was spent in social conversation after the refreshment, at which, of course, Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton failed to appear, and his apologies were made by the host, and petulant little complaints by Elma.

Then, the carriage was ordered and the party drove to Central Park for a couple of hours, after which, arrangements having been definitely made for the visit to Carriscourt on the following Tuesday, Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil were driven to the depot and returned home in the cool of the beautiful evening.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FIRST DROPS OF THE STORM.

It was the evening of the day during which Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil had taken luncheon with Mr. Pemberton, and dinner was just about to be served when Cuthbert made his appearance, with courteously-expressed apologies for his inability to have appeared at lunch, and with such apparent honest regrets at the pleasure he had been so very unfortunately forced to forego that Mr. Pemberton accepted his excuses and sympathized with his well-simulated disappointment.

"She is so perfectly lovely, Cuthbert," he said, enthusiastically, as they discussed the elegant, elaborate dinner. "I never saw any one who impressed me so strangely and strongly as Mrs. Carriscourt does, and I am actually looking forward with keen delight to my promised visit to them. You were so cordially included that I insist upon your going with Elma and I for at least a day or so."

A curious, slow smile crept around Cuthbert's wicked mouth, as he thoughtfully stirred his cup of French coffee.

"So your friend Carriscourt wants me to visit him, does he? Well—I am just a little surprised, for although my acquaintance with him is very slight, I have always been under the impression he disliked me. And he wants me to visit him."

He spoke indifferently enough, but in his head all sorts of queer thoughts were running confusedly.

"Was there ever such an intricate condition of affairs? By Jove, what had I better do about it? To think he wants me—me!—to visit him!"

Mr. Pemberton did not observe any peculiarity in his expression of face, for Cuthbert Pemberton was fully competent to permit one expression to show on his face and an entirely contrary motive to be actually governing.

"I think your impression is an imaginary one, Cuthbert. There is no possible reason why Mr. Carriscourt should dislike you, and you must not allow such a boyish excuse to interfere with your social obligations."

No possible reason! The irony of the entire affair, the sarcastic fatefulness of it, occurred with keenest intensity to Cuthbert.

"You may be right," he returned, deferentially—"there is no reason, unless it is one of those unaccountable prejudices that sometimes seize people. But—I may be mistaken. I certainly hope I am, and my accepting Mr. Carriscourt's invitation will effectually prove it one way or the other."

Mr. Pemberton looked pleased at the implied acceptance of Mr. Carriscourt's invitation, but before he could again reply, Cuthbert suddenly changed the subject of the conversation.

"Why is not Elma at dinner, sir? I hope she is not ill?"

Mr. Pemberton's face clouded, and he answered, sternly:

"She is not sick, unless you call an attack of the sulks illness. She chose to be rather pronounced in her behavior to Mr. Carriscourt this noon, and when I spoke to her of it, after my guest's departure, she took offense and refused to come down to dinner. Of course Miss Ogden ordered dinner for her in her rooms. Cuthbert, I am greatly disappointed in that girl."

He sighed heavily, as he almost always did when speaking confidentially of her.

"She certainly did very wrong," Cuthbert said, "but—in an extenuating voice—we should not forget that she is young, almost a mere child, and has not enjoyed the advantages of a discipline you would have so strictly enjoined had she been always with you."

Mr. Pemberton's lip curled.

"Almost a mere child! She is seventeen—yes, nearly eighteen—and old enough to behave herself. Look at the difference between her and—Mrs. Carriscourt, for instance, and they are about the same age. Don't make such flimsy excuses for her, Cuthbert."

But Cuthbert stood his ground well, although there was a trace of uneasiness in the light laugh that preceded his answer.

"It is natural I should seek to make excuses for her, sir. The truth is—and my dropping in to dinner was expressly to see you on the subject—I have to confess that my beautiful cousin has conquered me. She may be a child in years, but she has succeeded in playing a great deal of havoc with a heart I have hitherto regarded love-proof."

Mr. Pemberton sat down a crystal dish of orange-ice, in sheer amazement.

"What! You mean you are actually in love with Elma, actually in love with her?"

The incredulity in his tones was not

pleasant to Cuthbert, whose face flushed slightly at the words, and at the blank astonishment in Mr. Pemberton's face and manner.

"That is what I mean," he said, a little vexedly. "Is there anything astonishing in the fact that a beautiful young girl like my cousin should rank me among her victims?"

Mr. Pemberton's forehead was corrugated in a heavy stern frown as he slowly ate his ice.

"I cannot understand how any one could fall in love with her. She is pretty, and stylish, and when you say that, you come to the end of her attractions. Cuthbert, it cuts me to the heart to have to speak such things of my own niece, but I cannot conscientiously say better things. I would not like to see you marry her, knowing, as I do, her ungovernable temper. You would not be happy, you would regret your choice, and perhaps reproach me for consenting to allow her to become your wife."

Cuthbert's evil heart was jubilant at the success of his scheme thus far, for Mr. Pemberton had not at once said no, which was what he had fully expected.

"You are mistaken, sir," he went on, more eagerly than was his ordinary custom of address. "I really and truly love my beautiful cousin, and I am confident you have only seen the few faults she possesses, to the ignoring of her many admirable qualities. It could hardly be expected she would allow you to know her as well as she has permitted me to do. From the very first I saw a warm, loving heart beneath a trifling, perhaps girlishly vain and saucy manner, and from the very first I have been fascinated."

A thoughtful look gathered in Mr. Pemberton's stern handsome blue eyes as he pushed his chair slightly back from the table.

"Have you spoken to her about it?"

"I have told her all about it, sir, and she confesses to a reciprocation of affection, and, with me, desires to leave it all to you."

Just a faint sneer curled under Mr. Pemberton's frosty mustache.

"You are very considerate, indeed, considering the immense interests at stake." Then the smiling sneer disappeared, and a severity showed all over his face.

"There is just this about it," he said, very quietly. "According to your own words—Elma is too much of a child to know who she wants to marry. She naturally thinks you are the one, simply because she has had, as yet, very little opportunity of comparing you with other people. Not that I mean any discourtesy to you, but—in justice to you both I tell you that the girl should have a taste of society before she chooses her husband. Although as I have often said I am sadly disappointed in her and am fearful I never can love her, yet that does not alter my duty toward her as my sister's child. Elma will be a great heiress, but her money will not make her happy. I have seen so much of uncongenial marriages that I cannot allow her to assume such solemn obligations until she has satisfied herself beyond the possibility of doubt, that she loves you better than any one else."

A look of contemptuous vexation gathered in Cuthbert's eyes as he listened to the noble, principled defense Mr. Pemberton so frankly gave.

"Then I understand you refuse to allow me to claim the hand of your niece? And we both so foolishly imagined you would be so pleased at the mutual union of family interests?"

He spoke bitterly, but not as bitterly as he felt.

"That is perfectly true," Mr. Pemberton said; "such a marriage would please me very much on certain grounds. But there are other sides to the question, which I am morally bound to consider. I will tell you what I will do—and if your love and hers is as true as you say, it will stand a far more exacting test. I will agree to a two years' private engagement, during which time Elma shall go into society free and unfettered. At the end of that time, if you both desire it as you do now, you shall be married."

A look of fury glowed in Cuthbert's eyes as both gentlemen arose from the table.

"I think your conditions are unendurable, but I see nothing but to accept them, sir. I will tell Elma, and let you know whether she prefers the unnatural arrangement, or would rather end the engagement at once."

Mr. Pemberton bowed gravely.

"There will be no alternative if she loves you. Are you going? Will you not spend the evening? Then good-night, my boy."

He extended his hand, and Cuthbert took it, and made his adieux, hurrying off to some other engagement.

"A two years' engagement! I think not, Mr. Pemberton, Sr.! I will see Elma to-morrow, and arrange for a hasty, secret marriage, and Fletcher shall assist us and intercede for us. There is not much doubt but that the old gentleman will forgive us after the first natural vent of indignation. He has had such a lonely, sorrowful life that he will only be too glad to make friends with us again to brighten up the great grand house. Yes, Cuthbert, my boy, you are playing your cards most successfully; you are in a fair way to be the richest man out."

He was full of a suppressed exultation when he reached his hotel.

"I will just drop a line to the fair Cecil to tell her not to be surprised to see me in another character, in her husband's parlor, next Tuesday. I will say in my note that I will fully explain when I have an opportunity—I can trust to her woman's wits to make the best of it under the circumstances."

He carefully wrote a note of clear conciseness, without at all destroying the truth of his identity. Then he mailed it, and took a *coupé* to a notorious gambling-house on a fashionable up-town street.

"As I can't see Cecil in time to get the funds promised on date, I shall have to play with the dice again," he soliloquized, leaning back in the darkness. "By Jove, I begin to feel quite delightfully excited over the romantic adventures I'm having. This visit to Carris Court will be a literal intrusion into the fiery furnace, but I shall enjoy it all the more because of the breathless daring of it. What a picture for the Furies it will be to see that brave, glorious girl in the presence of the two men, both of whom she believes are her husband!"

A wicked little laugh was on his lips as his devilish thoughts ran swiftly on.

"I can trust Cecil to manage her part of the affair, and I will manage to see her alone, as any guest could easily do. I'll trump up some plausible explanation that will satisfy her, while at the same time I'll not lose my power over her—oh, it will be a grand game to play!"

A moment later his thoughts took a fresh tack.

"Before I go to Carris Court I'll see Fletcher and have the marriage take place. I'll make that safe and sound, at all risks, and then—for a rosy future!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WELL-MATED PAIR.

CUTHBERT PEMBERTON'S star seemed in the ascendant, and Fate and Fortune to combine to lure him on to still more venturesome paths, from whose pleasant, flowery ways he could get no glimpse of the appalling ending.

"I've been as wicked as ever man dared to be," he told himself, in an exultant, boastful way, that next morning, as, in accordance with a note from Fletcher, he went to that worthy's private room.

"I have known no law but my own will. I have never allowed myself to be disappointed or thwarted. I have ruthlessly removed whatever obstacles arose in my way that threatened the success of any object I had in view—if I used unadulterated King's English, or if I was speaking of any one else, I should say that unprincipled, vile, merciless, would be very apt words to describe the character of the man that Mr. Pemberton believes has very few faults. So then, it is not at all likely I shall allow myself to fail in these latest, most ambitious achievements of my curious career—to marry the heiress, and to keep up the delightful little affair with the fair Cecil, as well as maintain in funds if the old gentleman should prove refractory temporarily."

A crafty, wicked smile crept to his lips, but as he heard Fletcher's steps nearing the door, he instantly suppressed it. Fletcher met him with his usual half-familiar, half-respectful address.

"You are prompt, Mr. Cuthbert," he said, indicating a chair, which the young man declined briefly.

"There is so little time to spare," he returned. "I have been busy all the morning arranging for the marriage which will take place to-morrow. I have not hesitated to take your advice, Fletcher, as you will see. I have engaged a room at the St. Clarence hotel, whither in the course of a morning drive to-morrow I will take my cousin Elma. Of course you will be there—perhaps also Miss Ogden, to witness the ceremony the rector of the church of the Lily of the Valley will perform. Elma will return home, as usual, and until such time as circumstances determine no one but we four will be the wiser."

There was an eager nervousness in his manner that showed how much he realized was at stake.

Fletcher's inscrutable face relaxed into a curious sort of smile.

"Your promptness and keen intelligence in arranging this romantic affair is a charming compliment to Miss Pemberton. I only hope, Mr. Cuthbert, that the future will be witness to as much interest and attention and affection on your part as the present sees."

There was the merest suggestion of feeling in his tones. Cuthbert frowned impatiently.

"Drop that, Fletcher! Of course I shall treat her well—fully as well as she will treat me. Our tastes are quite alike, so far as a love for gayety and fashionable life and a grand showing are concerned, and I haven't the least doubt but that we will neither one kick in the traces."

Fletcher looked the least bit coldly displeased, but barely enough to be noticeable even to the sharp eyes of this man between whom and himself such a desperate game was being played.

"You ought to be very happy," he returned, slowly. "You are both young, and good-looking, and hopeful and healthy. There is an immense fortune waiting to be enjoyed that the most extravagant being can hardly embarrass. Miss Pemberton will be admired wherever she goes, and you, as her husband, will be a man to be envied. Yes, a fair fate is before you, and it will be your own fault if it is spoiled."

Cuthbert laughed carelessly.

"I shall not spoil it, you may be sure, considering that my wife will be keeper of the purse. And judging from your remarkable interest in our affairs, Fletcher, you will not be likely to allow the forgiveness to be spoiled. Do you know I cannot rid myself of the peculiar impression your anxiety for the happiness and welfare of my uncle's niece gives me? I never saw such charming devotion; indeed, were you a younger man, or my cousin older, I could easily imagine you transferring your friendship—or whatever you call it, to her!"

Fletcher smiled—a slow, sad smile that puzzled Cuthbert.

"You need fancy no such absurdities, sir. I am anxious to see the money remain in the family, and you, master, where you belong; and for reasons I have before given."

"Well, I'll go now, and tell Elma—for as yet I haven't consulted her. I had a blind faith in her acceptance of the proposal, and I am positive the end will bear me out in that belief. In all probability I will not see you before to-morrow, but you will not forget that the time and place are half-past nine, and the St. Clarence Hotel, parlor B."

He nodded and left the room, leaving Fletcher standing—the very model of quiet triumph.

"The puppets play into my hands just as I swore they should. To-morrow sees the accomplishment of the work for which I have planned and worked, lied and perjured myself. To-morrow, to all intents and purposes, sees the grand estate of the Pembertons transferred where I want it transferred, to Cuthbert Pemberton and Elma, his wife!"

He walked thoughtfully up and down the room, his hands crossed behind him, his pale eyes scintillant with suppressed exultation.

"He thinks I have no idea of what a wretched villain he is," he went on, a slow, impassive smile animating his thin, shrewd lips. "But I know him like a book—know that there are very few vices and dissipations which he has not committed, from the ruin of poor, yielding Sydney, years ago; to last night's carouse in a gambling-hell. And yet in the very face, eyes of it all—Elma shall marry him—because it is the only way!"

He remained a short time longer among his documents, and then went out of the house on matters of business.

Cuthbert had gone straight to Elma's room, but learned from the maid that she was in the music-room, whither he followed, so fortunate as to find her alone, turning over some new music in a listless, weary fashion.

Her face brightened at sight of him, and she came forward, extending her hand in greeting.

"I am so glad you have come! I am awfully blue and cross this morning, Cuthbert. That hateful Miss Ogden has been giving me some of her solemn advice, and I always rebel under it. Come, talk to me, and make me good-humored. Tell me about going to Carris Court—are you going? because I'm not!"

She paused from actual breathlessness, and sat down upon a *dos-a-dos*, which he shared upon her invitation.

He took her hand in an elaborate, reverent

fashion, and kissed it, giving her an adoring look that he saw pleased her overweening vanity.

"We will talk about Carris Court afterward, my dearest. I have another far more serious, and, to me, interesting subject to offer."

She looked curiously at him, her black eyes shining.

"Well, what is it, Cuthbert?"

"I have been to Mr. Pemberton, my dearest Elma, and the result is—he forbids our marrying. He is greatly displeased with you for what he styles your cavalier conduct to Mr. Carriscourt yesterday, and from what I can learn I am positive it is his intention to compel you to a severe course of discipline the next year or so. Our marriage he positively forbade."

Elma's eyes fairly flamed.

"The mean, disagreeable old tyrant! But, Cuthbert, I won't be disciplined!"

"Of course you will not submit to any such indignity, dear, although I could not very well tell him that. And equally, of course, he cannot hinder our marrying if we choose to be defiant; and—Elma, I choose to be defiant and make you my wife, in spite of all the obstacles in the universe."

He looked at her with a well-simulated passion in his eyes.

"Oh! A clandestine marriage! It would serve him just right to prove that we don't care a pin for him or what he says," and her eyes looked the coarse satisfaction her words expressed. "Only," she added, hastily, "he might disinherit you, and then—"

He smiled quietly, remembering how he had so successfully managed to acquaint himself with Mr. Pemberton's decision regarding the money.

"You may take my word, dearest, that there is not the smallest risk. Elma, will you consent to the arrangements I have made, subject to your sweet approval?"

She listened to the plan he had given Fletcher in detail, her eyes shining with mingled delight at this unexpected way out of her engagement to Thorsby St. Lawrence, and the idea of thwarting and conquering Mr. Pemberton.

"Will you consent, my darling? Will you make me the proudest, happiest man in all this city? Elma, will you marry me—to-morrow?"

She gave him a straightforward answer that could not fail of satisfying him by its conciseness, even if it were remarkably devoid of sweet shy sentiment:

"I don't see any reason why I should refuse. I have made up my mind to marry you, and one time is just as good as another to me. There, now, Cuthbert—there's no use going into ecstasies, or musing my laces, for I am momentarily expecting a call."

He bit his lip in momentary chagrin, but he was easily consoled to realize how great his triumph was.

"Your sweet coyness is one of your most intoxicating charms," he said, gallantly. "And now we will talk about the visit at Carris Court. You are not going, you say?"

"Indeed, I am not going. I am not disposed to humor every whim that the griffin happens to take. I said I'd not go, and I'll not. I don't at all admire Mrs. Carriscourt—did you ever see her, Cuthbert?"

"She is a perfect stranger to me, although I have seen her once or twice, but never to have the pleasure of speaking to her."

"Because," she continued, and not a muscle of his face betrayed the intense interest he felt, "she seemed unusually interested in you, and asked ever so many questions, and I am sure she hopes you will come to Carris Court."

He plainly understood the jealousy at bottom, and smiled in relief to know there was no other reason.

"I can assure you it is a terrible sacrifice for me to have to go to Carris Court—I shall not remain a moment longer than is absolutely necessary—how could I, knowing my sweet wife will be here, waiting for me?"

"But I shall not be here, waiting for you," she retorted, coolly. "I am going to Long Branch the same day you go to Carris Court. I had wondered how I could openly mutiny, and go in spite of uncle Griffith's commands, but now that I shall be your wife, I shall be under no obligation to him. Miss Ogden and I will go together, and you can come to us, there, and if the old gentleman scolds, you can just tell him we are married, and that will settle him."

He involuntarily shrunk from her vulgar frankness of speech of intention, but gave no sign of it to her, as he arose to go, as she bell rung to admit her visitor.

"Don't forget to-morrow, my darling, and try to be patient until then."

Once away from her, a hot flood of rage filled him.

"Curse her! I'll show her who's master before a month goes over her head!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THUNDER MUTTERING.

ALL the preliminaries having been arranged, it was perfectly easy to carry them out, and the next morning, a warm, breezeless summer day witnessed the secret marriage of Cuthbert Pemberton and Elma.

At the usual hour, the carriage had been ordered for that young lady's drive, and it happened, apparently very fortunately, that Cuthbert stepped on the brown-stone steps just a moment or so before Miss Ogden and Elma entered the carriage.

Elma's invitation to accompany them was accepted, and Mr. Griffith Pemberton bowed the pleasant little party away, little thinking of the treacherous deceit that was being perpetrated against his patience and kindness and generosity.

The party drove quickly to the St. Clarence Hotel, and were shown to Parlor B, where Fletcher was already in waiting.

Pemberton met him with a half-sarcastic smile.

"Your remarkable interest again, Fletcher!"

"I am in the habit of being ahead of time," he answered, quietly. "The clergyman is waiting, sir—he has but to be summoned from the ladies' parlor. He was shown in here, but I took the liberty of begging him to leave this room to the ladies, not knowing but that Miss Elma might wish—"

That young lady cut him short imperiously.

"That will do, Fletcher, since you are not supposed to know what I wish. Cuthbert, I am all ready—we might as well get over the ceremony, as I am in a hurry to do a little shopping."

Miss Ogden made a faint deprecatory reproof.

"Oh, Elma, you surely do not mean that the solemn service of your marriage is to be—"

Elma looked coolly at her, then interrupted her, insolently:

"I am in the habit—as some other people are—of meaning what I say. So, Miss Ogden, just understand that your position here, on this occasion, is perfectly similar to Fletcher's—you are merely servants, chosen as convenient witnesses."

Cuthbert smiled at her impudent unfeelingness, and Miss Ogden flushed painfully.

Just then Fletcher returned with the clergyman, a grave, dignified gentleman, who was introduced to the bride and her attendant.

And then the bridal party took their places, and the sacred, impressive ceremony was said, the responses clearly made, the elegant ring put on at just the right minute, and then the two were declared man and wife and God's blessing was asked upon the new union.

And the well-fed clergyman went away, and the four were left to the fate they had courted.

Of all of them, Hiram Fletcher's face betrayed the least joyfulness, but his heart was throbbing with wildest ecstasy at this actual accomplishment of the one paramount desire of his life.

Miss Ogden's face was pale and nervous, and more than once during the ceremony she had cast a troubled, wistful, half-terrified glance at Fletcher's inscrutable face.

Elma looked partly bored, partly triumphant, partly relieved, and the groom showed a quiet satisfaction at what had been done, and thereby secured to him, that was the keenest irony of fate.

After the marriage, the bridal pair returned to the carriage, which took Elma on her round of shopping after it had set her husband down at a desired place, on the route, while Fletcher went out to hire a cab to take Miss Ogden home.

Left alone with her a smile of overflowing satisfaction broadened his face, and his voice and manner were those of a man experiencing the keenest realization of success.

"Well, it is done at last, and no human power can undo it. For this we have spent nearly a score of the years of our life, but we are paid, amply paid. There will be a little unpleasantness when Mr. Pemberton discovers the young people's escapade, but I have undertaken to reconcile it all. Then, the bride will be installed mistress of her magnificent home, and our old age will be spent in peace and luxury."

He had spoken in a slow, meditative way, and Miss Ogden listened with that same troubled, half-frightened look on her face.

"Yes, it has prospered beyond my most sanguine hopes," she whispered, "but, oh, Fletcher—"

er, when I think of the awful risks we have run I tremble for fear that even yet—"

He hushed her, fiercely:

"Don't be a fool! No living soul knows the secret but you and I—it will go down to our graves with us, and no one will be the worse or the wiser. If you are going to be hysterical and continually apprehensive," he added, with a cold cruelty in his pale eyes, "you had better go back to Europe, and take your fright with you."

Her lips quivered as though she were deeply hurt at his unfeeling words, and she lifted her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Don't speak so, Fletcher! Despite her atrocious treatment of me, you know it would break my heart to leave Elma, and—"

"Then learn to display a little common sense! There's the cab—you had better go home and see if you cannot put a permanent restraint on your fanciful fears."

He escorted her down-stairs to the ladies' entrance and put her in the cab, and then went about his business.

At luncheon the entire party met again, including Mr. Griffith Pemberton, all unconscious of the condition of affairs, and, it seemed to them all, more gentle and gracious toward his niece than he had been of late.

She, too, was in a specially complaisant mood. The knowledge of her independence, the fact of her having had such a romantic adventure, and, beyond all, that she was absolutely free of Thorsby St. Lawrence, all combined to put her in a state of jubilant affability that exerted its influence on them all.

Luncheon over, Mr. Pemberton arose to retire to his library, his usual custom, and midway of the floor he paused and turned to his niece.

"It almost escaped me, Elma, to tell you that to-day I received a note from my friend Carriscourt and his wife, saying that there will be a lawn party on Tuesday afternoon, in your especial honor. I answered by return mail that I accepted the invitation for you, thanking them for their very charming consideration."

"Yes," she answered, indifferently, "but I said I was not going to the country."

Mr. Pemberton lifted his frosty eyebrows questioningly.

"Not going! I supposed you understood what I meant yesterday when I requested your obedience."

Her fingers were restlessly opening and closing her fan, and Miss Ogden, sitting opposite her, saw the portentous flash of her eyes, and the curl of her red lips.

"I understand that I shall go or stay just as I see fit, uncle Griffith, and I certainly shall not go. I should think that is explicit enough to satisfy you."

Mr. Pemberton's eyes began to darken, and he looked sternly at her.

"Elma! You will not forget to whom you are speaking!"

She tossed her blonde head contemptuously.

"There's not the slightest danger of my forgetting! And don't you forget that I will not be treated like a baby. I am old enough to choose my own places to visit and my own hostesses. I don't like that haughty, aristocratic Mrs. Carriscourt, and I'll never cross her threshold."

Miss Ogden was in an agony of fear, and she tried in vain to catch the girl's angry eyes. Failing, she called her attention by speaking, in a tone of entreaty and reproof.

"Elma!"

"You hush, will you? Your day of tyranny ended in Europe, and no other living person shall compel me to do what I do not wish. I will not go—there now—and I will not hear another word from any of you!"

She sent a swift, defiant look around the little group, and in so doing met the warning glances of Fletcher and her husband.

"Oh, you needn't think I care the least for any of you," she said, passionately. "I dare say you would all hugely enjoy seeing me completely sat down upon by uncle Griffith—but you'll not have the satisfaction! You are a cross, disagreeable, imperious person," she added, her fury rising higher and higher, and she turned desperately toward Mr. Pemberton, who stood in icy, haughty anger, listening to the storm of passion and rage—"and the sooner you once make up your mind to understand I'll not submit to your dictation, the better!"

Mr. Pemberton still stood silent, his grand old face growing whiter and sterner, his blue eyes gleaming frostily, and in his manner a terrible calm of restraint that somehow made an impression on all the astounded listeners to Elma's burst of passion, and particularly upon Flet-

cher, in whose eyes was a look frightful to see, in its freezing inscrutableness.

Miss Ogden sat, speechless and white, while Cuthbert in sheer amazement, said not a word.

Then, Mr. Pemberton slightly bowed his magnificent white head toward the infuriated girl.

"You may retire from the room, Miss Pemberton, and consider yourself banished from my presence, and the living rooms of the house until you properly apologize for your unwarrantable language and conduct."

His eyes fairly shot lightning at her, but she answered his cold, courteous tones with a fresh burst of fury.

"Then I'll never enter either again! Do you suppose I care whether you are pleased or displeased?"

And she flounced across the floor, and banged the door violently after her.

Mr. Pemberton looked meaningfully at Cuthbert.

"And that is the girl you love well enough to marry, Cuthbert?"

Then, he turned toward Fletcher with a hard, sharp glitter in his frosty blue eyes.

"Do you know, I sometimes wonder if she is my sister's child?"

A cold sweat suddenly broke out in huge beads on Fletcher's forehead, and for once in his life, his self-control deserted him. But only for one horrifying second.

"It must be a heart-breaking trial for you, sir, but, try to remember she is young and may overcome her childish temper."

A slow, incredulous smile crept under Mr. Pemberton's white mustache, and he gravely excused himself from the dining-room.

Miss Ogden at once followed Elma to her room, while Cuthbert and Fletcher left the house, Cuthbert in a state of half-amused, half-vexed excitement, the other, with a cold, stolid face from which the eyes blazed out a perfect lightning of terrible, yet mysterious meaning.

"I knew she had the reverse of a sweet disposition, but I'll be everlastingly hung if I bargained for such a devil's own temper."

To his utter surprise, Fletcher looked sternly at him.

"Don't forget you are traducing your wife. Whatever her faults, she is still your wife, with whom you are bound to protect and defend. She has made a mistake in her unfortunate display of temper—that is all."

Cuthbert laughed as he turned on his heel.

"And she'll precious quick learn from me not to make many more of them. Good-morning, Fletcher."

While in her room, Elma was storming and raging in her fury.

"I'll go away, and I'll never, never come back until that horrid old tyrant apologizes to me! I'll have my trunks packed this very day, and I'll keep my room until he goes to Carris Court on Tuesday, and then I'll go to Long Branch, and Cuthbert shall tell him we are married! I only wish I had told him—the old tyrant!"

And Miss Ogden cried and entreated and coaxed and humored until she succeeded in somewhat restoring calm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TIGHTENING THE CORDS.

At Carris Court the two or three intervening days before the arrival of their guests had been suitably employed by both Cecil and Mr. Carriscourt. Letters had been written to Mr. Oscar May, at Marchbrook, to Mrs. Sayre, with whom a pleasant correspondence had been maintained that was resulting in a true, warm friendship especially grateful to Cecil who had no intimate lady friends, and to several other parties whom Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil had chosen to invite.

From every one letters of cordial acceptance had been received, and Carris Court was looking its best and most lovely and beautiful for its guests.

Very little had been said between Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil since the last conversation on the subject of the trouble between them. A word or two from him had shown Cecil how the matter weighed upon Mr. Carriscourt's mind, but, the two or three days went by, and nothing special occurred to introduce the pitiful topic.

Every night Cecil had been in fear of another visit from Pemberton, and yet, she had fully resolved she never would permit him another audience in her private room. She had arranged to have the money ready for him, and had decided she would refuse him admission, handing it to him through the window.

"I would give my life to be free of this tor-

ment," she told herself hourly. "I cannot keep on this way always—I will not be able to supply the demands made upon me. I will see him once more—only once more, and then he shall not venture inside of Mr. Carriscourt's walls—and I will tell him I will submit no longer to his extortionate claims. I will agree to give him a stipulated sum regularly, and he must agree to that, or—"

But the weary, hopeless sigh that came from lips told how terrible the alternative was.

But, for reasons known to the reader, and known to Pemberton himself, he did not think it prudent to pay a midnight visit to Cecil at the appointed time, and, instead, he wrote his letter to her—a letter that by some strange complication of Fate never reached her.

The fateful Tuesday dawned exquisitely fair. Heavy showers of rain had fallen during the previous night, making the foliage fresh and sparkling as emeralds. Thunder had cleared all semblance of murkiness from the atmosphere, and a cool northerly breeze blew gently through the grand trees of the park.

Early in the day the Marchbrook carriage brought Mr. May upon his first visit to Cecil, and although there could not have failed to be a curious constraint upon him, as memory recalled the past, yet both Mr. Carriscourt and Cecil met and received him with a well-bred courtesy and welcome that soon obliterated that feeling.

At intervals during the day other guests arrived, and late in the afternoon the party from New York reached Carriscourt by train.

At the Grand Central Depot Mrs. Sayre had met Mr. Griffith Pemberton, and the two had traveled pleasantly together, talking of Cecil and her rare sweetness and charmingness.

Elma had been true to her word, and had steadily refused to accompany Mr. Pemberton. She had steadily refused to leave her rooms, and commissioned Miss Ogden with various insolent messages to him, which of course failed to be delivered.

Mr. Pemberton had not once mentioned her name to Miss Ogden, or to Fletcher, or to Cuthbert, and when the appointed hour for his departure came, he got into his carriage and was driven with his luggage to the depot.

Cuthbert found it impossible—so he cautiously told Mr. Pemberton—to accompany him to Carris Court by the afternoon train, but he would follow during the evening, after he had dispatched his imperative business—which imperative business was, to make sure that if one mail had not taken his note of warning to Cecil, another, and the very latest, might have done so. Also, he knew of Elma's determination to visit Long Branch, and, although Miss Ogden was to accompany and remain with her, he preferred to escort her thither and see her suitably accommodated, which he could comfortably accomplish and reach Carris Court by half-past nine in the evening.

So it happened that only Mr. Pemberton, of the Pemberton party, received Cecil's and Mr. Carriscourt's warm greeting. He shook hands with his host, and, as on the occasion of Cecil's visit at his house, he clasped her hands warmly, and kissed her on her lovely white forehead.

"I am glad to see you again, my dear—would you believe me if I say I have actually missed you from my home, after the brief sunshine you brought to it?"

He looked kindly, and almost gravely, in her splendid uplifted eyes, that were full of such sweet interest.

"It is a case of mutual friendship, Mr. Pemberton. Cecil looks upon you, as I am heartily glad she does, and as I look upon you, as a very dear, and honored, and valued friend."

Mr. Carriscourt spoke with feeling frankness, and Cecil's blue eyes indorsed every word.

Mr. Pemberton smiled.

"The promise of such friendship is very pleasant to me, and I sincerely hope the future will not disappoint me."

Just a little expression of bitter remembrance showed in his grand blue eyes as he thought of how sorely he had been disappointed, but he did not say anything about it.

"I am commissioned to make Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton's excuses," he went on. "There was some business he could scarcely leave this afternoon, much though he regretted not being able to come with me. But he will be up on the train due at 9:35 this evening—and exceedingly anxious to pay his devotions to Mrs. Carriscourt."

Cecil smiled and flushed a little, then, with a little bow, left the gentlemen to renew her gracious welcome to Mrs. Sayre.

Then the two ladies retired to the room as-

signed to Mrs. Sayre, and enjoyed a pleasant little chat, after which the entire party of guests met in the parlor, and mutual recognitions and introductions took place, and everything was delightfully harmonious and pleasant.

From her dressing-room Cecil heard the sounds of subdued gayety, and a pitiful, weary look crept into her lovely blue eyes as she submitted her hair to Kitty's skillful fingers.

"How little they suspect the ghoully skeleton in the closet! How little they imagine that one immediate cause of their presence at Carris Court is that Mr. Carriscourt and I are trying to stifle a terrible trouble—trying to seek temporary forgetfulness in the duties of hospitality."

Her thoughts ran on as she made her toilet, and seeing the old, weary look in her eyes she made a desperate effort to drive it away.

"It will not do," she chided herself, resolutely. "I will struggle, as if for my life, to maintain a calmness that shall pass for contentment—until the guests are gone—and after that—I dare not think again!"

She was looking most radiant and beautiful after her toilet was completed, and by sheer force of desperate determination she had exorcised the haunting shadows her eyes.

She wore pure white—Mr. Carriscourt liked a white toilet better than anything else, and Cecil's heart had thrilled with passionate love and longing as she told Kitty to lay out her white silk and lawn dress, trimmed with foamy Breton lace.

She did not wear much jewelry—a pair of small, magnificent solitaires in her little pink ears, and narrow gold bands on her perfect arms that were bared to just below the dimpled elbows. At her throat amid a soft knot of white lace she wore a bouquet of pale-pink roses, and another at her belt—and, so attired, went into the presence of her guests, almost startling every one by her spirituelle beauty and grace, and making Mr. Carriscourt's heart thrill eagerly at sight of her, so gracious, so gentle, so lovely.

While Mr. Pemberton's face suddenly paled, and his frosty eyes grew misty, and his breath came in labored inspirations as he looked at her.

"My God—what a resemblance—and yet a thousand times fairer! What can it mean? Why is all my heart, all my thought continually going toward this perfect creature? My very brain whirls at the fancies that come and go, so mockingly."

All unconscious, Cecil moved among her guests the very impersonation of well-bred elegance and gracious hospitality, smiling and chatting with one, listening to another, putting every one at their perfect ease, and diffusing her charming influence as she went, followed by her husband's longing eyes and Mr. Pemberton's grave, bewildered, stormy ones.

As she moved about, Mr. May stepped up to her.

"Cecil, I am especially anxious to be shown a wonderful fern Carriscourt tells me is in the conservatory. Can you not spare one minute to show me?"

Cecil took his arm and smiled *au revoir* to the gentleman with whom she had been conversing, and moved off toward the fernery, Mr. May at once opening a conversation with her.

"I want to see the maiden-hair fern, Cecil, but I could not longer wait for an opportunity to have a moment's quiet congratulatory chat with you. Cecil, my dear, you ought to be the proudest, happiest woman in all the world, with such a princely home, such a prince for a husband. Surely you suffer no ungratified wish—it is plain to be seen that your husband worships you, but yet, Cecil—and this is why I have ventured to take the liberty—there is a quiet, sad, pitiful look in your eyes that one who knows you well cannot fail to see. What is the matter, Cecil? Are you not happy with your husband?"

He looked down on her face, intensely interested to witness the rapidly-changing expression that crossed it as he spoke, and now, first a sudden flaming flush surged from brow to throat, followed by a paleness all the more startling in contrast. Her head drooped for a second, and he saw her lips quiver, despite her noble effort at self-control.

Then, she lifted up her head in a quick, passionate impulse, as if to speak haughtily and angrily; then, surprised him by a low, thrilling answer.

"I do not see how you can think such an impossibility for a moment. You once earned my everlasting gratitude by giving me my dead mother's picture, Oscar, and for the sake of

that, I tolerate from you the question you have put. And answer it by saying emphatically—no woman ever had a husband more revered and loved than mine. If you see shadows in my eyes, Oscar"—and then came a pitiful little wail in her sweet voice, "remember all I have gone through—since—since—Judge May died."

He winced under her touching, patient reproach.

"But we agreed to bury all that past, Cecil," he said, a little coldly. "You promised I should be a friend to you, and—I imagined—"

"You are wrong, Oscar. Mr. Carriscourt is my best, dearest friend—although," and her voice lost its brief, spirited ring, and mellowed into its usual gentle quiet, "I thank you. Now, I will show you the ferns; then, please take me back to the drawing-room."

When she went back, no one would have supposed there had been anything agitating during her few minutes' absence.

A little later dinner was announced, which lasted until nearly half-past nine, and the party of young people took themselves out on the beautiful grounds, leaving in the drawing-room only Mr. Pemberton, Cecil, and Mr. Carriscourt, sitting in low, luxurious chairs near the open French window, engaged in delightful conversation.

Just as a servant—like *Fate en masquerade*—preceded a gentleman into the room, and, with a stately bow, announced the latest guest, "Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton."

Mr. Carriscourt arose and immediately stepped forward, shaking hands with him with quiet courtesy.

While, from his easy-chair, Mr. Pemberton sent a familiar welcome.

"Well, Cuthbert, I am glad you did not disappoint us. My nephew, Mrs. Carriscourt, of whom—"

He paused sharply in the midst of his presentation, for, Cecil had arisen from her chair, with eyes wild and dilated, her face whiter than her dress, her hands clasped in a dumb fear and horror, her lips ashen and compressed.

Then, a pitiful, wailing agony in her sharp tones, she cried out, "No! No! oh, my God!" and fell forward, in a deathly swoon, in her husband's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BURSTING OF THE STORM.

ACCORDING to her determination, Elma Pemberton had left her uncle's house for Long Branch, accompanied by Miss Ogden and her husband, within an hour after Mr. Pemberton had started for Carris Court.

The party reached there before sunset, and were driven to the Ocean House, where rooms had been engaged by telegram, and where, after seeing them safely settled, Cuthbert left them, just in time to catch the train that should return him to the city in time to be transferred and connect with the evening express for Carris Court.

An hour later a hotel servant brought Elma a note, in a penciled handwriting she knew only too well, making an appointment on the sands in half an hour, and designating the exact spot.

"Of course it will be easy enough to dispose of him, now," Elma thought, as she crushed the note in her hand. "No matter what he says, or threatens, he cannot compel me to keep my engagement with him. I really believe since I received that letter from him, and not seeing him for so long, and the great change that has occurred in my prospects, that I have not only ceased to care for him, but actually dislike him."

She ordered Miss Ogden to get a pale-pink zephyr shawl from the trunks, and saying she was going out by herself for a little while, started leisurely to the place of rendezvous, followed by many pairs of admiring masculine eyes.

Half-way between the hotel grounds and the sands she was met by a tall, rather handsome man, of dashing manner and dress, into whose cool gray eyes came an expression of extreme satisfaction and undisguised admiration as he went up to her, almost eagerly, and extended his hand.

"Well, Elma! Consider yourself kissed. My dearest Elma, how glad I am to see you again."

She laughed lightly, as she laid her hand in his.

"So, Thorsby, you have come all the way to America to see me, have you?"

The indifference of the address seemed to surprise St. Lawrence not a little. There flashed a look into his gray eyes she remembered so well.

"A man would prove a very miserable sort of lover if he did not follow his sweetheart—especially a girl so pretty and so dangerous as you, Elma. Yes, I followed you, and came over purposely to see you—because"—and he smiled oddly—"you may have understood from my letter that I was growing jealous of your long silence and fearful lest you should favor some other lucky fellow."

She removed her hand that he had retained.

"There wasn't the least use, Thorsby, of your coming. If I had wanted you, I would have sent for you."

Her impatience was so hard for her to control. All her life she had given way to every impulse, until she was the very embodiment of impulse; and this time she did what she never before had done—she thoroughly angered Thorsby St. Lawrence.

"Thank you. You seem remarkably appreciative of the devotion that actuated me. It is rather a curious reception to give the lover to whom you are betrothed in marriage. You do not seem at all like yourself. I hope the sudden promotion to wealth and position has not spoiled you, Elma."

The cool indifference on her face increased.

"I don't know that it has spoiled me, Thorsby, but I do know that I have changed my views on very many subjects since I have been in my new home."

He gazed steadily at her, his sarcastic, piercing gray eyes never losing the sad smile in them that made Elma feel just a little uncomfortable, but, despite which sensation, she went doggedly on:

"I have learned one very important thing," she said, almost coldly, "and that is, that I was very much mistaken when I thought I cared enough for you to promise to marry you. It never can be, Thorsby. Uncle Griffith would never in the world consent that I should marry you."

"Ah! You are quite complimentary and equally confident, my dear. You can of course understand this welcome is very distressing to me, and"—and a swift resolute look, mingled with a passion that told her that he loved her desperately despite her coolness, her harshness, swept stormily across his bold, good-looking face as he stepped closer to her in his earnestness—"and you are equally capable of understanding that I shall not submit to any such treatment. You loved me not so very long ago, before you dreamed you were the niece and heiress of a great man, and I hold your promise to be my wife; and I—loved you then, and love you just as well now."

There was a masterfulness in his tones that would have frightened her had she not known that she held in reserve a fact that would utterly overthrow all his persuasions or threats.

"You are very good, indeed; of course any one who once loves me always loves me," she returned, complacently.

He laughed, but it was not a very amused laugh.

"Your charming conceit is only excelled by your frankness, my dear Elma. I'll indorse your estimate of yourself most cordially, and add—that no sensible man who had secured your written acceptance of a proposal of marriage would allow its retraction."

She began to grow impatient, and he saw a flash of wrath in her black eyes.

"But I tell you I will not marry you—there now, promise or no promise, Thorsby St. Lawrence! You have come on a fruitless errand, and you can go back as you came."

He compressed his lips with wonderful self-control, but his eyes were fairly scintillant.

"Very well, Miss Pemberton. Then my next proceeding will be to go to the Fifth Avenue mansion to-morrow, and lay your delightful letters before your uncle and claim their promise. I dare say you have no objection?"

If he had hoped to intimidate her he failed most signally. She smiled scornfully:

"Don't go, please. Uncle Griffith would have the hall porter put you out of the house; besides, he is not at home; he is at Carris Court."

She could have bitten her impulsive-spoken tongue off for the admission, but it had passed her lips. Fate ordained words that were to hurry the climax of the terrible tempest about to burst on so many heads—the first muttering of which were already about her husband's ears.

St. Lawrence smiled coldly and lifted his heavy brows.

"Indeed? Then I will wait his return from—'Carris Court,' I think you said—or, better still, go to him at—'Carris Court.'"

He seemed to relish the repetition of the

name, and his malicious manner enraged her. Her eyes flashed like ebony stars, and her breast heaved angrily.

"You will not go, you disgraceful adventurer you! You will not dare go; you would never be received in the drawing-room. You are not such a looking or appearing gentleman as I have become accustomed to since—"

He stepped up closer to her for one brief second; Elma thought he meant to strike her.

"Stop, right there! It will not be well for you to add insult to injury. Elma, I have this one thing to say to you that it will be well for you to consider calmly: I came to America because I loved you better than any woman in the world, but it would not require much more of your treatment to turn that love into a hatred you will rue to the latest hour of your life. Shall we drop this unpleasantness, and be friends, lovers again, or—"

All the evil in the girl's heart was up in arms.

"Your hatred! Do you suppose I care for your hatred any more than for your love? I tell you, Thorsby St. Lawrence, your cowardly threats are entirely lost upon me. You can brag and boast of what you will do but I never will marry because I just despise you in the first place, and, in the second place—I am already married! There now!"

She flung out her feminine climax with a scornful, tantalizing triumph, expecting to see him annihilated at the information.

His face paled for one second, and he bit his lips beneath his thick mustache, but he looked unflinchingly, with intensest desperation in his eyes, straight at her sullen, angry, yet strangely-triumphant face.

"So you are—married! And that is why you could afford to defy me, is it? Well, Miss Pemberton, perhaps it is as well that you are—married. I would have married you for—love," and he smiled peculiarly—"while I dare say the present happy man had an eye to your prospects. Yes—it is perhaps as well as it is, for every one but yourself and your—husband. And now, as the first of a few facts I am disposed to furnish you, allow me, in offering my sincere congratulations, to inform you that you are not the niece and heiress of Mr. Griffith Pemberton."

For the first time during their interview, a look of dismay came into Elma's eyes. Thorsby St. Lawrence knew the secret that Fletcher had said would be buried with him and Miss Ogden.

He saw the fear and dismay on her face and knew he had struck the blow home, despite her instantly rallied courage.

"What are you talking about? Are you crazy or—do you consider this a part of your revenge? Not uncle Griffith's niece! How romantic!"

She laughed—mirthlessly, however. He bowed with elaborate sneering courtesy.

"A very romantic story, indeed, Miss Pemberton, and also, so refreshingly true. Shall I give you a little history of what I happen to have known these past five years? It may serve to prove to you that my declarations of affection were honest and true, seeing that I have known all those five years, that you were not the genuine heiress of the great Pemberton estate. How I learned the well-planned, better-executed story, I shall not tell you; it will be enough that I convince you that, instead of being the daughter of Mrs. Genevieve Fairfax, and the niece of Mr. Griffith Pemberton, you are—"

He paused, in tantalizing, smiling scorn, knowing full well the effect his slow-spoken, truthful words, and his tormenting pause had upon her.

A sudden, awful dismay that deepened into a painful nervous fear with every heart-beat, was visible on her face, as he paused, the secret yet unspoken.

"Well—tell me, if you have anything to tell. I knew I was not a true Pemberton," she said, with reckless sullenness, "but I have made myself safe and sure in marrying Mr. Griffith Pemberton's nephew and heir."

His face lightened with scornful satisfaction. "So he concluded you were not suitable to inherit his money, after all, I take it? And in default of a better legatee, made it over to—Mr. Cuthbert Pemberton, the man you married?"

A look of actual fear shot from her eyes. How did St. Lawrence, a total stranger, know of Cuthbert Pemberton? He answered the question so visible in her looks.

"I dare say you are dumbfounded, but when I tell you I have been in New York city ever since you have been here, studying up this charming romance, and that my letter to you was written not a block from your house and sent to a friend in London to be remailed, you

may understand it better. Perhaps, also, you will accept it as a fact which I can prove when I assert that Mrs. Cuthbert Pemberton is but the natural daughter of Hiram Fletcher and Miss Elizabeth Ogden."

Elma gave a little gasping shriek that the wind and the roar of the surf carried seaward.

"It is a horrible, horrible lie! How dare you?" "Truth cannot be gainsayed," he answered, coolly. "I can prove that you were born, out of wedlock, on the same day that the real heiress was born; that your mother, later, undertook the care of both children; that, during one of Hiram Fletcher's visits from America, the plan was adopted that has worked so well—you, their own child, were educated as the heiress, while the sweet little Cecil was given for adoption to a gentleman and wife of the name of May, who were traveling in Europe. Whether she is alive or not, I cannot say, but, if she is, she is the rightful heiress. She would be an exquisitely beautiful woman, if her babyhood fulfilled its rare promise. She was fair as a lily, with golden hair—not yellow like yours, and eyes as blue as the Italian skies she first looked upon."

A breathless horror had come over Elma as she listened, and before he had finished she recognized the description, the name, the circumstances that told her Cecil Carriscourt was the heiress of Pemberton! While she—and a great fury of rage swept over her—while she—oh, it could not, it *should* not be—that she was—the child of the two people she detested most on earth!

She turned her death-white, desperate face fully toward him—a lion at bay.

"I don't believe it! I will not listen to another of your abominable lies! It is your revenge, but do you think I care? I will never, never look at you, or speak to you again!"

She instantly walked away from him, trembling so, her limbs scarcely sufficed to carry her back to her room, where she burst in upon Miss Ogden, like an infuriated demoness.

"Is it true? Is it true, you vile wretch? Am I your child and—that beast's—Fletcher's? If it is true, I could kill you!"

The swift, awful fear in the woman's face was enough for the confirmation of the fact. She fell on her knees in agonized sobs, trying to cling to the girl's dress.

"God knows I would have spared you this! But, don't, don't look at me so—my little Elma, my baby I loved so well!"

Elma struck her a brutal blow, that only miraculously escaped killing her. As it was, she staggered to the sofa, white and faint, while Elma, in a raging fury, walked up and down, up and down, until, in sheer exhaustion from temper, she threw herself on the floor, desperate to the end.

While Mr. Thorsby St. Lawrence quietly stepped into the hotel office, paid his bill, lighted a cigar, inquired for the first train to New York, learned where Carris Court was, and in an hour was on his way to enact his share in the fast-coming doom.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A RIFT IN THE CLOUD.

A CONSTERNATION naturally seized Mr. Carriscourt and Mr. Pemberton as Cecil fell fainting in her husband's arms. Mr. Pemberton sprang to the window, calling Mrs. Sayre, who, together with Mr. Carriscourt, assisted in restoring her to consciousness, each one of them expressing their astonishment at the strange occurrence—Cuthbert Pemberton alone holding the clew to the apparent mystery, and looking most concerned and kindly solicitous and surprised of any of them, as he stood gravely aside.

"Curses on the stupid blunder that has somehow or other been committed! Is it possible she failed to receive my letter?"

It was several minutes before Cecil revived, and it was a piteous sight to see her lying there, still and white as the dress she wore, her eyes closed as if never to open their blue loveliness again, sending unutterable thrills of anguish through her husband as he hovered anxiously over her, chafing her cold hands, and bathing her fair temples with the pungent ammonia.

Suddenly she drew a long, sobbing breath, and the blue eyes fluttered open, in an expression of fear and terror evident to see, an expression that verged to an agonized panic as her gaze fell upon Pemberton, standing in respectful, grave surprise, a little aside.

As their glances met, he stepped courteously forward, bowing.

"I regret, very much, having been so unfortunate as to agitate Mrs. Carriscourt by my very evident resemblance to some one else—perhaps a deceased friend."

His voice thrilled her with chilling horror, and she put up her hand, feebly, as if to ward him off, her anguishful eyes going to her husband's face in piteous entreaty, then, a gasping whisper came from her lips, just as, almost by inspiration, it occurred to Mr. May, who it was that Cuthbert Pemberton resembled.

"Hush, Cecil," he whispered, bending over her apparently to remove a tress of hair that was falling toward her eyes, "for God's sake, hush! You think it is Sydney Valence; you are mistaken; it is only a wonderful resemblance. Don't speak Sydney's name—that silly engagement to him would anger your husband. Calm yourself."

His firm, kindly meant tones were like an elixir to her. The idea that possibly there were two people so much like one another, strengthened and encouraged her, temporarily—sufficiently to avert for the moment any ill-consequences.

Mr. May turned toward Mr. Carriscourt, smilingly.

"It is Mr. Pemberton's extraordinary likeness to a deceased friend of hers that has agitated her—for the moment she thought the dead friend stood before her."

A look of relief passed over Pemberton's face. "I am exceedingly sorry to have been so unfortunate, Mrs. Carriscourt. May I not hope you will not regard my unlucky presentation as an omen of evil?"

He had walked up to her, and courteously bowed, extending his hand in grave deference, looking square in her eyes that were gathering their horror again.

"Not a word! I'll not betray you!"

He whispered the words rapidly as he held her hand a second, then, he turned away, not in the least agitated.

Cecil smiled a wan little smile toward her friends.

"I am very foolish, I fear, but I am stronger now. Mr. Pemberton has quite reassured me, and I hope we will all forget my extreme awkwardness."

Her eyes began to glow with the reaction setting in, and the rich red tint crept back to her lips, and, as she realized with still more assurance that the miserable secret was yet hidden from her husband, her courage increased, and her fears were temporarily allayed, and she was her sweet charming self again, except when occasionally she met Mr. Carriscourt's grave, thoughtful eyes, and then it required all her fortitude to keep up her show of gayety.

The evening grew toward half-past ten before the parties on the lawn and terraces and from the lakelet came strolling in in twos and threes. Then, there was a little music, an hour of dancing, and then lemonade and cake was served, and the guests retired to their rooms, where, on her dressing-bureau, Cecil found a letter from Pemberton.

"Evidently you failed to receive my note of warning and explanation," it began, promptly, "and so I will repeat that, although to you I am Sydney Valence, to the world, and in my family I am known as Cuthbert Pemberton. And the reason why I have the two names is, that in consequence of there being a legacy left me in case I assume my mother's maiden name—Pemberton, uniting it with the family Christian name Cuthbert, I assumed it for the sake of the fortune, and have legally adopted it since our marriage. My true name is, and was, at that time, the one by which you knew me—Sydney Valence. I hope I have succeeded in making this clear to you. I hope also I shall succeed in making you understand I mean you no ill by this visit that Fate has ordained—that while I am your guest, I remain as Cuthbert Pemberton. I shall treat you as the hostess, and so charming a hostess, should be treated, and for your own sake, you will treat me as you do other guests the short time I remain at Carris Court."

The letter was an infinite relief to Cecil, who slept more soundly that night than in a long while before.

The next morning she was down in the breakfast-parlor before any of her guests, looking fresh and sweet as a rose in her white morning-dress and pale-blue ribbons.

She was busy at her usual duty of arranging in vases and crystal saucers the basket of cut-flowers the gardener had his standing order to bring her every morning, when Mr. Griffith Pemberton came down, the very ideal of the aristocratic old gentleman with his spotless summer linen, and cool diamond studs, and grand, handsome face whose keen blue eyes lighted warmly at the fair picture that Cecil made bending over the beautiful, fragrant flowers.

"It is not necessary to inquire after your health or happiness, Mrs. Carriscourt," he said, as he gave her his hand and her own nestled in it for a second; "your looks tell both. I am more than ever regretful that my willful niece

did not come to see such sweetness and purity."

Although his words were chivalrous, Cecil detected the bitterness in his voice, and she answered very gently:

"I wish Miss Pemberton had come. I would have tried to make her contented. Perhaps another time she will accept my invitation. Carris Court will always be open to any of your household."

Her heart gave a little sharp thrill as she thought that Sydney Valence, or as she knew him now, Cuthbert Pemberton was a member of that household.

"Thank you, my dear child. I fear I shall wear many welcomes out if you are so hospitable. Carris Court is a charming place—finer than Marchbrook, to my thinking, although it has been years since I paid my one business call there. You must entertain very sweet, sacred recollections of your dear old home, Mrs. Carriscourt, and it must be a great satisfaction to have your brother so near you."

A little impulsive quiver came to Cecil's lips.

"I love Marchbrook dearly, dearly," she said, touchingly. "But, Mr. Pemberton, you are mistaken in thinking Mr. May is my brother, or that Judge May was my father—although"—and the tears sprang to her sweet eyes—"I loved him just as well as though he had been."

A sudden interest came to Mr. Pemberton's face.

"Is it possible? Judge May not your own father, my dear?"

"I was an adopted daughter," she said, gently, "but I knew no difference. Who my own darling mother, or who my father was, I never knew. I only know I was a nameless orphan when Mr. Carriscourt gave me his dear name and love."

A subdued passion was in her low, thrilling voice as she went on arranging her flowers. Mr. Pemberton stood still as a statue, strange, painful emotions almost suffocating him in alternate fears and doubts, and—sharp imaginations.

"But—your mother, child! Don't you know anything whatever of her? Her—her—name?" and his voice trembled in awful suspense.

Cecil shook her head sorrowfully.

"I don't know even her name. She died when I was a baby in Italy, where—"

He laid his hand suddenly, heavily on her shoulder.

"She died—when you were an infant—in—Italy!"

Cecil looked up at him, surprised, a little startled, but held by his strong magnetic glance that went to her very soul.

"That is what Mr. May learned from papa—from Judge May's papers. And I have her picture—would you like to see her picture?"

The agitation on Mr. Pemberton's face was almost alarming. His grand old face was white as his linen. His eyes were full of eager, painful suspense and excitement. His breath was labored and heavy, yet, withal, there was a gentleness in his voice and manner that was inexpressibly delicate.

God be merciful and grant me this sweet hope!" he said, in suppressed, reverent tones. "Show me the picture—your mother's picture."

Cecil opened a magnificent locket she wore suspended from a black velvet ribbon about her neck, and laid it on his quivering hands, just as Mr. Carriscourt entered the parlor, in time to see the look that passed over his splendid face, to hear the mighty sob that shook his frame, to hear the passionate cry of ecstatic thankfulness that went up from his lips.

"I thank my God—oh, I thank my merciful God! Carriscourt—your wife is my Genevieve's daughter! This is my sister's face!—I have been drawn to Cecil from the first moment I saw her. My darling, my darling!"

He gathered Cecil in his arms, laying her sweet head against his dear old face, tears streaming from his happy, reverent eyes, as he gave his hand to Carriscourt in an ecstasy of exultant joy.

They adjourned to the privacy of Cecil's boudoir, where a long mutual conversation was held, during which Mr. Carriscourt told Mr. Pemberton how, upon the occasion of their visit to him, the same strange suspicion had occurred to him.

"We will keep our sweet secret to ourselves, to-day," Mr. Pemberton said, as he sat and caressed Cecil's fair hand, wondering why there was not the rapturous joy on her husband's face he himself experienced. "We will keep it to-day, and to-morrow I will inquire into the mystery of the imposition Fletcher has palmed upon me—although I honestly believe the poor fellow will be as delighted afterward as chagrined at first at the mistake he has made. I

"Don't understand it, though," he said, thoughtfully.

And then they separated, Cecil to go about her delightful little duties in a dazed sort of way, her heart thrilling with delight at thought of her new happiness, and then sinking with fear as other thoughts came crowding over her.

CHAPTER XXXII.

INTO THE SUNLIGHT.

THE day passed delightfully to the guests at Carris Court. The morning was devoted to breakfast, billiards, visits to the stables and points of interest on the estates. After lunch, arrangements were made for carriage drives, and with the exception of Cecil, Mr. Carriscourt and Mr. Pemberton the entire party started, in three or four of the Carriscourt carriages, for a drive up the river.

Mr. Carriscourt had a business engagement with one of his tenants that promised to detain him in his library during most of the afternoon. Mr. Pemberton pleaded his age and disrelish for after-luncheon dissipation as an excuse, and retired to the western drawing-room to indulge in a siesta in the cool, breezy gloom, while Cecil, to whom the excitement of the morning had given a headache, retired to her rooms for rest and sleep, if possible.

It was about four o'clock when she arose, greatly refreshed, and bathed, dressed and descended to the delightful little north parlor, her favorite room on the ground floor, a small, elegant apartment between the west drawing-room on one side and Mr. Carriscourt's library on the other.

She took with her a dainty little lace trifle of work, and had ensconced herself cosily in a corner window over which luxuriant vines crept, their green leaves continually swayed by the fresh summer breeze—expecting to have the afternoon exclusively to herself, and greatly surprised when Cuthbert Pemberton walked in, leisurely.

She looked up, showing her displeasure in her stern, sweet face, but he came forward, easily and smilingly, and seated himself in a chair opposite her.

"I changed my mind, Cecil, and decided I would very much prefer a quiet little chat with you, seeing that I leave you this evening. I beg the privilege of a guest to be entertained a little while."

She compressed her lips, as if to restrain words that she preferred would remain unspoken, and gathered up her strip of lace-work, and the tiny gold thimble and gold scissors that were resting on the window-seat, and arose from her chair.

"You will have to excuse me, Mr. Pemberton. I certainly expected and desired to spend this afternoon alone, and will return to my private rooms."

Her voice was cold and dignified, and it angered him greatly. He reached out his hand, detainingly.

"You are not going, Cecil—understand that. I came back purposely to see you, and I do not intend to be disappointed. Sit down while I talk to you—and remember that I can call a most fearful storm upon your head at any moment."

She looked him steadily in his wicked eyes, her heart throbbing with the old fear and miserable hopelessness, and yet her voice was full of intense undauntedness.

"Remove your hand, sir! Whatever you have to say to me, say quickly, for I shall leave the room in just five minutes."

He smiled.

"Only five minutes for your devoted husband! Cecil, that's too cruel. Don't be sarcastic, or too dignified, but allow me to refresh your memory with the fact that although you are regarded as the hostess of this charming place, you are really and truly—my wife."

If she could only have known! Her blue eyes looked piteously into his, withal that a desperate fire gleamed in them.

"Will I ever forget? Oh, my God, if I could only forget—for one minute!"

He regarded her admiringly.

"By Jupiter, Cecil, what a glorious creature you are! You are enough to make a man lose his head—see here, Cecil," and his eyes gleamed with a strange fire that appalled her as she met the evil, passionate glance—"do you know you never once have allowed me the smallest of a husband's privileges? You never have permitted me to kiss you—my wife! Cecil—I love you more than ever—you are cruel, horribly cruel—I will not endure it any longer—kiss me, Cecil. I have the right to demand a kiss, for are you not my wife?"

She shrunk back appalled, shivering at his ardent looks.

"Dare to address me so again, and I will instantly alarm the house!"

He followed her smilingly and holding out his arm.

"No you won't, my beautiful Cecil. You won't betray our charming secret just yet. You are afraid of—Carriscourt, but you need not be afraid of me! Come, Cecil! My lovely wife—come kiss me!"

But he did not advance another step, for there was something in Cecil's face he never had seen there before, something in her blue blazing eyes, and snow-white face and tightly-shut lips that told him he had taken just the one step he could have cursed himself for taking.

"I will not be tormented another moment by you, vile, heartless villain that you are! From this moment I defy you—I defy you! You have done your worst—now, I take my turn. Mr. Carriscourt! Mr. Carriscourt! Come here at once!"

She suddenly raised her voice in a sharp, imperative summons that brought her husband in alarm to her side, and aroused Mr. Pemberton dozing on the sofa in the adjoining room, and sent him also to her in surprise and alarm.

As he entered the room, Cuthbert gave her one swift, entreating glance she well enough understood, but refused to notice, as, turning toward Mr. Carriscourt, with a low, passionate cry, she pointed scornfully at her persecutor whose face was pale as death.

"There he is—that is he," she said, gaspingly, her eyes flashing in defiant desperation; "he is the man, Mr. Carriscourt, whose name I dared not tell you—who has embittered and burdened my life—the man you saw leaving my room, because he had the right to demand it. Cuthbert Pemberton—Sydney Valence—whatever you choose to call him!"

Then, her high, sweet voice ceased, she drooped her golden head on her breast, and folded her hands in an attitude that touched even Cuthbert Pemberton's vile heart.

Mr. Carriscourt listened, almost dumbfounded and horrified, his gaze freezing both her and the discomfited villain, who was inwardly cursing his luck.

"What does this mean?" Mr. Carriscourt asked, looking from Cecil's bowed head and drooping form, to Pemberton's white, terrified face—the face of a rogue caught in his own net.

A silence like death followed, broken by the voice of a servant.

"Mr. Thorsby St. Lawrence, of Florence, Italy, to see Mr. Griffith Pemberton, on important business."

Of Florence, Italy! Mr. Pemberton looked instantly at Mr. Carriscourt.

"With your permission, I will see this stranger, here."

Mr. Carriscourt bowed, and Thorsby St. Lawrence entered the room, easy, self-assured, bowing courteously.

"My business will not detain you long, sir, and, unless I am mistaken, concerns this gentleman quite as much as yourself. I have information in my possession which it is my duty to lay before you, sir, regarding—your reputed niece, or, rather, the wife of your nephew, there."

A smothered curse burst from Cuthbert's white lips, and a little inarticulate cry from Cecil.

Mr. Pemberton smiled grimly.

"Sir, your information comes just a little late, since this morning I have learned that this lady, Mrs. Carriscourt, is my niece, and consequently my heiress, in place of the other young woman, to whom you refer. You are mistaken, however, in supposing she is my niece by marriage."

He looked at Cuthbert, who made a pitiable spectacle standing alone in all the heart of the tempest his own misdoings had brought upon him.

"I have it from the young lady's own lips, sir, that she is Mrs. Cuthbert Pemberton. I do not think the gentleman will be so ungallant as to deny it?"

Every eye was fixed on the discomfited villain whose tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, in sheer dismay.

"What does he mean, sir? Are you married to Elma Pemberton? Did you dare disregard my commands?"

A sullen fury darkened his face.

"It is true. We were married last week."

A lightning scorn shot from Mr. Pemberton's grand blue eyes, then a sneering smile came to his mustached mouth.

"You are well served! You married her for her money, and I have the pleasure to inform you that she is less to me than yourself will be, henceforth. I have always looked upon you as a model young man, free from the faults that cursed and ruined your twin-brother's life, but now I believe you a thousand times worse than poor Sydney, whose tragic death has atoned for much—"

A little hysteric scream from Cecil interrupted him. He turned to her, as they all did, to see her blue eyes full of agonized questioning, her face quivering with emotion.

"Mr. Pemberton, for God's sake, explain this terrible mystery to me! You spoke of that man's twin-brother—Sydney—and a tragic death! Who is he?"

She pointed her finger at Pemberton, who quailed before the glances directed at him.

"He is Cuthbert Valence Pemberton."

"And he had a brother—"

Cuthbert himself interrupted her in a devilish, mocking voice:

"The game is about played out! He had a brother, a twin-brother, and his name was Sydney Valence Pemberton, and he dropped the latter name for obvious reasons before he married you, my charming sister-in-law!"

Mr. Carriscourt stepped forward, his eyes fairly appalling in their hot passion.

"What do you mean, you villain?"

Cecil stepped up between them, pale, composed, but a light in her sweet eyes that thrilled his very soul.

"Be patient just a little longer, Mr. Carriscourt, and I will explain."

"I will be patient, but first this man must leave my house. Mr. Pemberton, will you allow me to show your nephew the door?"

"With pleasure, and I will assist you."

St. Lawrence interrupted the rather summary proceedings.

"If you will allow me one word more, gentlemen, before you proceed to business, I would like to have the extreme satisfaction of telling this young gentleman whom he has married; I would like to inform Mr. Pemberton of the stupendous fraud Hiram Fletcher has been so nearly successful in perpetrating, in palming off upon him his own and Elizabeth Ogden's illegitimate child as the true Pemberton heiress."

A smothered curse burst from young Pemberton's lips, and he dashed out of the room, snatched his hat from the hall-stand, and left the house, to go direct as he could to wreak his wrath on Fletcher's unconscious head, and then to disappear from New York society, a desperate, reckless rogue, to live a life of crime and villainy that has barred him forever from even third-rate society.

Thorsby St. Lawrence did not ask, and would not receive any remuneration for his information; his revenge was complete, and he went back to England as he came.

Fletcher was quit of Mr. Pemberton's house when that gentleman returned, a day or so later; and joined Miss Ogden and Elma—neither wife nor widow—at Long Branch, from which place their miserable, purposeless life began, full of quarrels and recriminations. Unfortunate speculations took all the money Fletcher had amassed, and his old age was full of bitterness and poverty, while Elma's disposition grew worse and worse until she was utterly friendless and desolate.

And so wickedness had its just reward, and we drop the dark curtain, to gladly turn to Carris Court and sweet Cecil.

It was the evening of the same day, and the guests were enjoying themselves in their own way, and Mr. Carriscourt was sitting in his library, when a servant brought a message that Cecil wished to see him in her boudoir.

He immediately obeyed the request, and found her alone, waiting for him.

"I think it is best that there be no more secrets between us, Mr. Carriscourt," she said, as, entering the room, he took up his position beside the mantle-piece—just where he had stood once before, in that terrible interview they had had when it seemed to Cecil her heart would break.

His face was wistful and weary—not the face of a man to whom the tidings of great joy were so soon to come. And Cecil's own sweet face was troubled, yet not as troubled as it had habitually been of late.

"I think so, too, Cecil, and I have curbed my impatience since the partial revelations of this afternoon, hoping—expecting—you would come to me, or send for me."

"I told you that the nephew of Mr. — of my uncle Griffith, was my midnight visitor, the man in whose power I was, whom I was bound

to obey. I learned to day, for the first time, that I was under no such obligations to him, because he is not the person I have been supposing him—ever since the day—of—our marriage. I—I—thought he was his brother whose name was Sydney, and—and—

Her voice faltered, and a swift wave of crimson surged across her face as she dropped her head.

Only a second, then her honest, brave soul went on mechanically.

"I will tell you all. I was married to Sydney Pemberton—"

Carriscourt uttered a great agonized cry.

"Cecil! No! No!"

Her lips quivered at the sight of his pain, but she went on, resolutely:

"Yes. We were married in the Marchbrook Parsonage, late in the afternoon of one day. We took the train to the city, and after we left the train I never saw him again. He committed suicide, and—that was the end. I never was his wife—it was but the mockery of the ceremony—I never, never was his wife in fact, Mr. Carriscourt, any more—than—than yours."

She averted her lovely face, and her mouth quivered pitifully. She looked like some beautiful creature awaiting her doom. His eyes were fastened upon her, the woman he loved so madly—the brave, proud, sweet girl whose life had been so blighted.

He understood all the mystery now—that it was to spare him, that it was because she believed her first husband was living—that the barrier had been erected by her own courageous womanly hands.

"Cecil!"

She answered him gently, but not turning her face toward him.

"Yes, Mr. Carriscourt."

"Cecil—you loved Sydney Pemberton, or else—"

She sprung from her chair in a sudden passionate impulse.

"Oh, no! No! I never loved him, I never—"

He stepped up to her, his eyes shining, his face losing the shadow it had worn so long.

"You did not love him? Cecil! Then there is no secret between us now?"

"None."

"And there is at last a hope for me? Oh, my precious wife, is it possible you can learn to love me, now?"

A rosy flush surged from throat to brow for one little second. She drooped her lovely head further away for one second more, then she shyly lifted her sweet adoring blue eyes to his face—with a look that fairly took his breath for rapturous ecstasy.

"Clyde! My husband, you have not to wait for my love; I love you now; I always have loved you!"

And he snatched her in his arms, great tears dropping from his eyes on her bright golden head, and he strained her to his breast, kissing her over and over again—the happiest pair that breathed God's summer air.

And out of the great discipline of sorrow came the great peace that nothing but death can end.

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